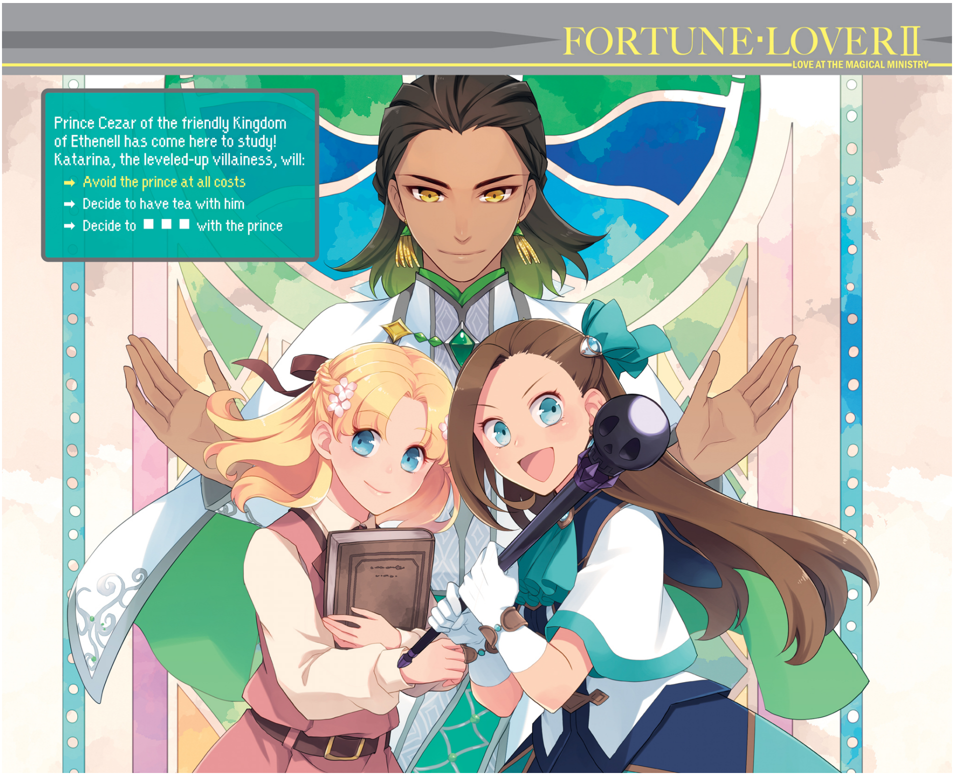
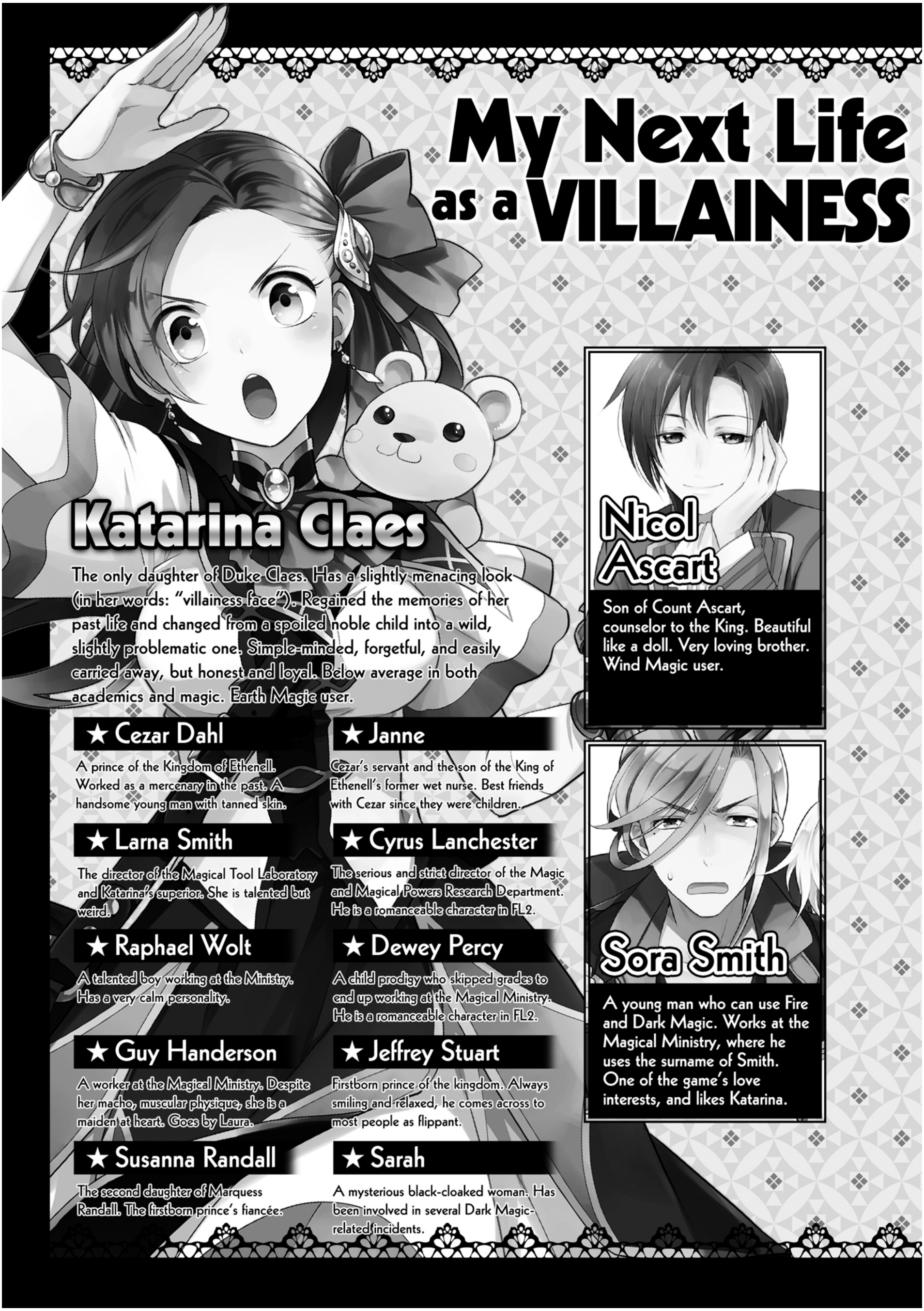
Author:
SATORU YAMAGUCHI
Illustrator: NAMI HIDAKA
13
My Next Life as a VILLAINESS: ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!


FORTUNE·LOVER II
LOVE AT THE MAGICAL MINISTRY

Prince Cezar of the friendly Kingdom of Ethenell has come here to study! Katarina, the leveled-up villainess, will:

- ➡ Avoid the prince at all costs
- ➡ Decide to have tea with him
- ➡ Decide to ■ ■ ■ with the prince



My Next Life as a VILLAINESS

Katarina Claes

The only daughter of Duke Claes. Has a slightly menacing look (in her words: "villainess face"). Regained the memories of her past life and changed from a spoiled noble child into a wild, slightly problematic one. Simple-minded, forgetful, and easily carried away, but honest and loyal. Below average in both academics and magic. Earth Magic user.

★ Cezar Dahl

A prince of the Kingdom of Ethenell. Worked as a mercenary in the past. A handsome young man with tanned skin.

★ Janne

Cezar's servant and the son of the King of Ethenell's former wet nurse. Best friends with Cezar since they were children.

★ Larna Smith

The director of the Magical Tool Laboratory and Katarina's superior. She is talented but weird.

★ Cyrus Lanchester

The serious and strict director of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Raphael Wolt

A talented boy working at the Ministry. Has a very calm personality.

★ Dewey Percy

A child prodigy who skipped grades to end up working at the Magical Ministry. He is a romanceable character in FL2.

★ Guy Handerson

A worker at the Magical Ministry. Despite her macho, muscular physique, she is a maiden at heart. Goes by Laura.

★ Jeffrey Stuart

Firstborn prince of the kingdom. Always smiling and relaxed, he comes across to most people as flippant.

★ Susanna Randall

The second daughter of Marquess Randall. The firstborn prince's fiancée.

★ Sarah

A mysterious black-cloaked woman. Has been involved in several Dark Magic-related incidents.

Nicol Ascart

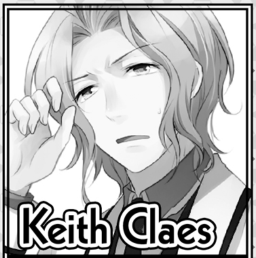
Son of Count Ascart, counselor to the King. Beautiful like a doll. Very loving brother. Wind Magic user.

Sora Smith

A young man who can use Fire and Dark Magic. Works at the Magical Ministry, where he uses the surname of Smith. One of the game's love interests, and likes Katarina.

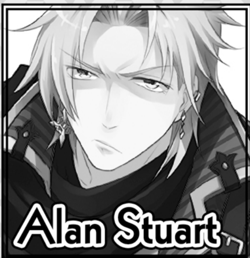
ALL ROUTES LEAD TO DOOM!

Characters



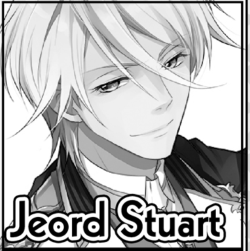
Keith Claes

Katarina's younger brother, adopted by Duke Claes from a distant branch of the family because of his magic prowess. Sensual and handsome. Earth Magic user.



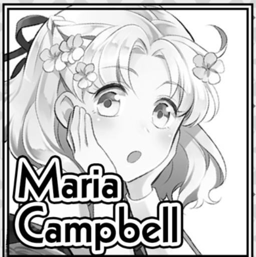
Alan Stuart

Jeord's younger twin and the fourthborn prince. Ruggedly handsome and self-centered. Talented musician. Water Magic user.



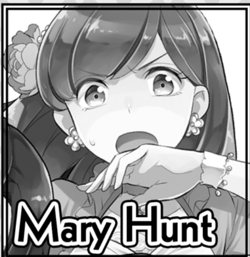
Jeord Stuart

Thirdborn prince. Katarina's fiancé. Has the stereotypical good looks of a blond, blue-eyed prince, but has a calculating, dark personality. Met Katarina when he had lost interest in everything else. Fire Magic user.



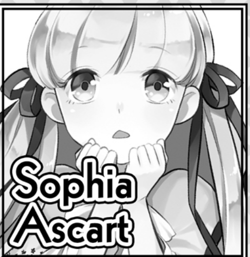
Maria Campbell

A chosen girl who wields Light Magic despite being born a commoner. Hard worker and protagonist of the otome game. A very good baker.



Mary Hunt

Fourth daughter of a marquess and Alan's fiancée. Sweet and beautiful. Known as a paragon of ladylikeness among noble society.



Sophia Ascart

Daughter of Count Ascart, and Nicol's younger sister. Bullied by those around her because of her white hair and red eyes since childhood. Calm and collected.

★ Pochi

A Dark Familiar who usually lives inside Katarina's shadow.

★ Anne Shelley

Katarina's maid. Has been serving her since Katarina was eight years old.

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Chapter 1: News of an Exchange Student

Sprawled beneath a tree in the mountains that stretched far and wide behind my house, I clutched my foot in desperation.

I had just twisted my ankle after I tried to climb the tree and fell. My ankle was throbbing and I couldn't walk properly. As if that weren't bad enough, as I lay there, the sun was steadily setting. This was my own fault for coming here to practice climbing trees by myself, but there was a reason I'd done so.

I grew up with two older brothers. Partly due to the fact that my eldest brother was a lot older than me, he was always kind. The problem was my second eldest brother. This brother and I were always treated as some kind of pair, ever since we were little, but because he was born a few years earlier, he always achieved things well ahead of me.

That was even true of climbing trees. Although my grandpa had taught me how to climb first, my brother—having started later—got really good in no time at all. Before I knew it, he was scampering up trees like a monkey.

Wanting to be like him, I practiced climbing, but never seemed to get any better. He teased me about it too. That really irked me.

While I reflected on all this, dusk gradually descended on the mountain, and I started to worry.

What if nobody finds me? What should I do?

Though this mountain was not especially big, and I had never heard anyone mention bears appearing there, my grandma had told me that when night fell, wild animals began to roam. I started to shiver.

Thinking to myself that I needed someone to find me soon, I called out loudly for my mom, my dad, my grandpa and grandma, and then my eldest brother. But no one came. Then, though it pained me a little to do so, I finally called *his* name.

"Big Brother —!"

"Hey."

No sooner had I called my brother than I saw him pop his head out from the other side of a nearby bush. I froze up in shock.

Then, with an air of aloofness, my big brother spoke.

"You were taking so long to get home that mom told me to come look for you. Hm, what's wrong? Did you injure your foot?"

He asked this after looking down and seeing that I was clutching my ankle.

"Yeah… I think I sprained it. I can't walk properly, so go and fetch a grown-up," I responded, without mentioning anything about the tree I'd been climbing.

"I dunno… If I go back home to fetch someone, the sun will set in the meantime."

"Urgh."

The sun was indeed very close to setting. Seeing how worried I looked at the thought of being left alone again, my brother made a counteroffer.

"C'mon, hop on," he said, turning so that his back faced me.

"Eh? But…"

If a grown-up had offered to give me a piggyback ride, I wouldn't have thought twice about it, but considering that my brother wasn't much bigger than me, I hesitated.

"Unlike you, I work out, so don't worry about it. Hurry up, it's nearly dark out," my brother insisted.

I decided to take him up on his offer and climbed onto his back.

"All right, let's get going," said my brother before proceeding to smoothly descend the mountain's slope.

I was amazed that he was able to walk back down the mountain so smoothly while carrying me, despite the fact that we weren't that different in size.

My big brother really is amazing, I thought, though it pained me slightly to admit it.

Though he really wasn't much bigger than me, I decided to trust him and held on tight.

When we got back home, my brother lowered me down in the entryway as soon as we were through the front door.

"We're home! — twisted her ankle!" my brother called out down the corridor.

"What, really?! Are you all right?" My mother came in a hurry. After seeing us, her eyes widened and she let out a cry of dismay.

"And what happened to you?! What's with all these scratches?"

Following my mother's gaze, I saw that my brother's legs had certainly sustained enough injuries to warrant her reaction.

"It's just one or two little scrapes. They'll heal as long as I clean them," said my brother, in spite of the blood oozing from the scratches that covered his legs, before hurrying deeper into the house.

"No, there's nothing 'little' about that. You need to properly disinfect those," my mother called out to my brother as he retreated. Then she turned back to look at me. "It was a twisted ankle, wasn't it? Can you walk on it?" she asked.

It looked like I could walk, albeit slowly, now that I wasn't on a precarious mountain trail.

"I'm okay," I answered, then recalled the sight of all the scratches on my brother's legs.

He must have had trouble moving as he normally would have because he was carrying me, which caused him to scrape his legs on the trees and bushes around us. He acted like it was no big deal, but I bet that his injuries actually hurt a lot. I suddenly felt quite touched.

"Come on then, let me help you up. I'll take a proper look at your foot once we get you situated somewhere more comfortable," my mother urged me, so I rose to my feet.

I felt like the pain had subsided slightly compared to earlier. At this rate, my brother's injuries might turn out to be more severe than mine.

"Now then, were you two playing together today? Don't I always tell you not to play dangerous games? Be more careful."

"Eh? Weren't you the one who told him to come look for me?"

"Eh? What are you talking about?" My mother wore a perplexed expression.

Wait, that must mean that, when my brother noticed it was getting dark outside and I still hadn't come home, he decided to come and look for me all by himself.

Though he was never honest about how he felt, and teased me so often that he sometimes seemed like a bully, I knew that deep down he was extremely kind.

"Thank you, —."

"Wake up… Please wake up. It's morning."

At the sound of this voice, I lifted my leaden eyelids to find a familiar ceiling above my head.

I lay in my bed in a vast room filled with luxury furniture.

Ah, that's right. I'm no longer —. Instead, I'm...

"Lady Katarina, are you awake?" Peering down at me as she called my name was Anne, Katarina Claes's personal maid.

"Morning...Anne," I replied.

My head was still a bit fuzzy, and my eyelids remained heavy even as I rubbed them, but Anne forced me to get out of bed.

"You still have to go to work at the Magical Ministry today, you know. Now then, let's get you ready."

I surrendered myself to Anne as she briskly dressed me for the day. In the blink of an eye, I was ready for work. I really felt grateful to have her. When I still lived an ordinary life, in my past life, I never could have imagined living like this, with my own maid to take care of getting me dressed in the morning.

That's right, my past life. I still possessed memories of my past life, before I was reborn as Katarina Claes, daughter of a duke. Or rather, I recalled them one day.

This happened one day when I was eight years old, when I accompanied my father on a visit to the palace. As he was showing me the garden, I tripped and hit my head. At that moment, my memories of my former life suddenly came rushing back into my mind. I recalled that I was once an ordinary high school girl, an otaku, living in a country called Japan in a world that was different from this one.

Perhaps because of the sudden recovery of my memories, I developed a high fever and was bedridden for some time. I was yanked back in time by recollections of life as an ordinary high school girl, undergoing a drastic character transformation as a result and turning over a new leaf. However, as I was getting used to my new life, I suddenly realized something shocking: The world I currently lived in was the setting of an otome game I had been playing just before I died in my past life—a game called *Fortune Lover*!

It was certainly a surprise to find myself reborn in the world of an otome game, but that in and of itself was not such a big problem. However...it so happened that I had been cast in the role of *Fortune Lover's* villainess, who was destined to torment the game's protagonist before meeting her own doom! If the protagonist achieved a Happy End, Katarina would be exiled from the kingdom, but in the case of a Bad End, she would face death. Either way, Katarina Claes was a person who was invariably marked for doom.

If I didn't do anything to stop said doom, I was headed for an untimely death, just like in my previous life. Having realized this, I started to work tirelessly to evade my impending doom. I began plowing a field to grow vegetables, trained to fight with a sword, practiced making toy snakes, somehow made friends with the game's romanceable characters and rival characters alike, and went back to plowing the field some more. With all my efforts, I was able to overcome the doom I was meant to have met during my time at the Academy of Magic.

In spring of this year, I graduated from the academy none the worse for wear, and found employment at the Magical Ministry together with my good friend Maria, the game's protagonist. It was the first full-time job I'd ever had, including in my past life. Unfortunately, after I'd motivated myself to do the best job that I could, I had only a fleeting moment to focus on work before learning that the sequel to *Fortune Lover*, *Fortune Lover II: Love at the Magical Ministry*, was about to begin!

Not only that, but Katarina Claes, who was supposed to have been dealt with—by being exiled from the kingdom—was set to return as the villainess! And the Bad Ends in this game would receive an upgrade—this time she would face imprisonment or death!

No way was I going to put up with a Bad End now, not after having managed to overcome doom at the academy! I racked my brains to find a way to overcome doom in this game's story as well, but regardless of my intentions, I ended up obtaining items that placed me squarely in the role of a villainess—chief among these were my Dark Familiar and Dark Covenant.

Still, thanks to the mysterious dreams I was lucky enough to have now and then, and my own superb powers of deduction, I had managed to discover that there were only six months left in the storyline of the second game. I resolved to spend each day doing everything in my power to make it through these six months.

"Lady Katarina... You're all ready to go."

"Ah! Thanks, Anne."

Whoops, I was totally lost in thought.

Right, today's a new day! Time to give it my all at work!

To shake the memory of the nostalgic, wistful dream I'd had that morning from my mind, I psyched myself up for the day ahead.

A little more than six months had passed since I joined the Magical Ministry and found myself assigned to the department that was rumored to be the last place you'd want to end up—the Magical Tool Laboratory—since it was apparently filled with weirdos. In that time, I had more or less grown used to my work in the department and my somewhat peculiar senior colleagues.

Because the workers in the Magical Tool Laboratory were quite capable, the Ministry had a tendency to give them all sorts of miscellaneous tasks. There was even a lot of physical labor involved, so considering that I found myself getting sleepy whenever I had to sit at a desk and read documents, perhaps it suited me well.

However, following my discovery of a suspicious tome known as the Dark Covenant, I had been forced to spend my afternoons working on deciphering its contents. I had to look up all the characters I couldn't read (from an ancient script) in a dictionary as I read the covenant. This work also made me really sleepy.

More recently, I had even started training in Dark Magic, in order to apply what I was learning from the Dark Covenant. This new project occupied my mornings. That I was now unable to perform my regular duties for the Magical Tool Laboratory—duties I had gone to such great pains to learn from my mentors—made me feel quite sad.

That wasn't all. In order to train me in Dark Magic, I'd had to ask Raphael to teach me. Some called him the "real head of the department" since he often had to assume the duties of Larna, its official head, whenever she got too obsessed with her own pet projects and ditched work. I felt guilty about adding to Raphael's workload when he was already so busy.

I wanted to learn all I could about Dark Magic as quickly as possible, so that I could stop being a burden on him. Afterward, I'd still have the Dark Covenant to tackle, but I could do that on my own, relieving him of his teaching duty.

"You did a good job of absorbing that," Raphael—the "true head" of my department and my instructor in Dark Magic—said with a smile. But I got the feeling that he was actually a bit frustrated.

Just as Raphael said, I'd managed to absorb my own Dark Magic today, as I did every day. I'd gotten really good at absorbing it. I'd learned to do it very quickly, in one smooth motion. But I hadn't made progress in any other areas.

I still couldn't generate a cloud of darkness any bigger than a tangerine, and all my training in reshaping the darkness had yielded only hazy results, with no further progress as the days rolled by. I felt extremely guilty.

"Maybe... Maybe I don't have any talent when it comes to Dark Magic," I murmured. Of course, my attempts at Earth Magic were just as pitiful, so I got the feeling that actually I had no talent for magic at all.

"That just isn't so. Haven't you already improved so much when it comes to absorbing darkness?" Raphael asked, seeing how dejected I looked.

My teacher is really too kind.

"Thank you so much. But I really can't do anything except absorb it..."

Sometimes I wondered if you could even call the mere act of *absorbing* darkness "Dark Magic." The part of Dark Magic that dealt with controlling people's minds was dangerous, and immoral. I wouldn't ever use it, so that part didn't matter, but the Dark Magic I had seen other people using could shroud an entire room in darkness, or even create a whole dark dimension. They used darkness on a much bigger scale, and it seemed to just burst out of them. Despite that, my limit was a tangerine-size lump of darkness. Creating another dimension seemed like a pipe dream for me.

Besides, even if I was getting good at absorbing the darkness, I couldn't actually use that skill if I couldn't create darkness in the first place. If I could only produce a tangerine's worth, I would have almost no use for my absorption skill. It didn't look like I was going to be able to live up to the expectations that the Ministry's higher-ups had for me—to discover new forms of Dark Magic. I let my shoulders slump, feeling utterly dejected.

But Raphael just smiled kindly.

"I still think it's amazing that you're able to absorb it so quickly," he said. "You surely have a knack for that, Miss Katarina."

"A knack?" I repeated, looking back at his kind, gray eyes.

"That's right. It simply isn't that case that any two people using the same type of magic, and possessing the same amount of it, will be able to use it in the same way. They will each have techniques they're good at and those they're not so good at. This just means you're good at absorbing darkness, but not so good at creating it. So don't let it get you down so much." These were the kind words he gave me.

I did also possess Earth Magic, but only a meager amount—all I could do with it was create a Dirt Bump. So I hadn't learned these facts about magic before.

I guess everyone really is different, even if they use the same type of magic. With this thought, the uneasy feeling that had been building up in my chest began to fade away.

"But, if we just stand here talking about it, we won't make any progress, so let's focus on training," Raphael continued. "Even if you don't have a knack for something, if you keep trying hard, you should improve, even if only little by little."

When it comes to magic, there are individual differences between people, so even if I can't do something, I shouldn't let it get me down. And if I apply myself, I can still improve, even if only marginally.

These were lovely words, and were exactly what I needed to hear at that moment. Raphael really was a wonderful teacher. He truly understood how his students felt.

"Okay. I'll keep trying. Let's get back to training," I responded, raising my head confidently.

This was met with a chuckle from Raphael.

"Hm?" I cocked my head in puzzlement, prompting another chuckle from Raphael.

"Oh, nothing. I was just thinking, 'That's our Katarina,'" he said with a smile.

"Huh?"

What does that mean?

To dispel my confusion, Raphael explained himself.

"I think the ability to absorb darkness really suits you, Miss Katarina."

"Suits me?" I cocked my head yet again.

"Yes. You shine like the sun, banishing the darkness," Raphael replied, still wearing an amused smile. This was the kind of dialogue I'd expect from a romanceable character—almost like a pickup line.

"The... The sun?" Seeing me freeze up in spite of myself, Raphael grinned broadly.

He praised me so naturally, and smiled so brilliantly. The force of his smile made me blush, just a little. It was at that moment I remembered that Raphael actually *was* a romanceable character in the first game. A hidden character, and a sort of final boss at that.

In terms of appearance, he was a beautiful young man with red hair and gray eyes. Not only that, but he was kind, and good at listening to other people's problems.

Throwing out lines like that, with such a sweet smile—I bet that, if he put his mind to it, there's no woman Raphael couldn't romance.

"Now then, shall we try once more?" Raphael invited with a grin.

While still reeling from this reminder of just how formidable he was as a romanceable character, I knew I had to respond.

"Okay," I replied. With a newfound resolve, I returned to my training in Dark Magic.

When I finished my Dark Magic training with Raphael for the day, it was time for lunch. After checking if any work had arrived for me at the department that morning, I told Raphael I'd be taking my lunch break. We parted there and I headed to the cafeteria by myself.

There were several places around the Ministry where one could enjoy a meal, including some spots that looked like trendy cafés. But I went to the cafeteria, which had the biggest dining area and the most generous portions, almost every day. There, I would enjoy a tasty meal and fortify myself for the afternoon of work that lay ahead of me.

Hmmm... I wonder what the specials are today. As I went to check, someone called out from behind me.

"Oh? Is your training for today over already?" said a very familiar voice.

I turned around to see a beautiful, seductive young man with blue hair and eyes—Sora—standing there. Until I was reassigned to Dark Magic training and deciphering the Dark Covenant, I'd worked with Sora—my colleague at the Magical Tool Laboratory who was hired at the same time as me—almost constantly, so we were close. Only, since he was a romanceable character in *Fortune Lover II*, there was always a chance he would bring doom upon me if he ever developed a bond with Maria, the protagonist. So I also considered him somewhat dangerous.

Besides Sora, Maria's boss Cyrus—head of the Magic and Magical Powers Research Department, the Ministry's most prestigious department—and Maria's colleague Dewey, a boy prodigy, were also romanceable characters in *Fortune Lover II*. If Maria, the protagonist, formed a bond with either of them, I would again face the possibility of my own doom.

With that in mind, there were times I thought it would be better for me to keep my distance from all of the romanceable characters, but Sora and I were already good friends. I had also taken to helping Cyrus with his vegetable patch (which he had set up on Ministry grounds in secret). And since Dewey and I were hired at the same time, we also enjoyed a friendly chat whenever we happened to meet. It would have been odd to avoid them entirely at that point, so I decided to maintain my friendships with all of them and closely observe their movements (particularly anything in the direction of romance with Maria). After all, keeping a closer eye on them could make it easier to tell if there was any chance of them developing a bond with her.

Finally, there were two more romanceable characters in *Fortune Lover II*, but they were both hidden characters, one of whom remained unidentified for now.

As for the other one...

"What's the matter? Is it really that difficult to choose?" said Sora, his voice snapping me back to reality.

Shoot, I got lost in my own thoughts again.

Obviously I couldn't talk to Sora about otome games and romanceable characters, so I decided it would be best to pretend he was right and I had simply been agonizing over what to order for lunch.

"Ah... Umm... Well then, perhaps I'll go with the steak lunch for today. A large portion," I answered.

Sora furrowed his brow.

"Didn't you have a large portion the other day, only to complain that you felt sick and your stomach hurt later? Don't make the same mistake," he warned.

"Eh? Did I? But I really am hungry today, so I feel like I'll be okay."

"No. Why won't you learn? I'm sure the same thing will end up happening."

After receiving this lecture from Sora, in the end I caved and only ordered a regular portion for my steak lunch. I took my tray from the lady who worked in the cafeteria, sat next to Sora, and wasted no time in eating that meat.

The sensation of the juice gushing out of the meat into my mouth, the way it seemed to melt on my tongue, told me that this cafeteria was still using excellent meat. And it was seared so perfectly too—their steak really was to die for.

Yum... This is heaven...

Just as I was taking another bite, someone else spoke up.

"Lady Katarina."

Raising my gaze from the steak to the person who had addressed me, I saw a gorgeous woman with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a smile that stretched from ear to ear approaching our table with a tray in hand. She was Maria Campbell—the true protagonist in the world of this otome game.

"May I sit with you?" she asked, now standing in front of me. In stark contrast to my meat-heavy meal, her lunch was centered around fruits and vegetables and looked much prettier than my steak.

I guess this is just one more way in which the protagonist and the villainess are different, I thought.

"Please, sit," I said, gesturing to the empty seat across from me.

"Thank you very much." Looking delighted, Maria sat down opposite me.

Before the plot of the otome game began, I had been quite wary of her, given she was both the protagonist and the villainess's rival, but once I entered the Academy of Magic—the setting of the first game—and actually interacted with Maria, I'd found that she was an absolutely lovely girl. As a bonus, she was also a natural at baking sweets, so she had completely captured my heart (and stomach). Then, once we graduated, we both came to work at the Magical Ministry and had only grown closer since.

"Will you be spending this afternoon in the usual fashion?" asked Maria in between elegant mouthfuls of her salad, as I chewed on my steak.

"Yep. Business as usual. What about you?"

"Business as usual for me as well."

"Let's both do our best, then."

"Yes."

Generally speaking, unless some other more pressing work came up, we each spent our afternoons working on deciphering our respective covenants: Maria with her Light Covenant and me with my Dark Covenant. Both were written using an ancient script. Moreover, only the person who had been accepted by a tome could read it, making it impossible for anyone else to help us with this difficult task. We constantly referred to dictionaries as we sat in the same room, each of us working on deciphering our own covenant.

However, compared to Maria, who even after graduating still remembered the ancient script we'd learned at the academy—though the covenants were written in an even older script, there were many similarities to what we'd studied—I had only ever learned enough to just barely make a passing grade, and had completely forgotten everything as soon as each test was over. So there was a huge discrepancy in speed between us when it came to deciphering the text. The gap was so great that, while I was still working desperately just to decipher the many warnings included at the front of my covenant, Maria had already learned to use spells she had found in her covenant.

And anyway, I simply wasn't remotely suited to working on deciphering texts—or doing any other desk work—in the afternoon. With a full stomach, I often found myself getting sleepy. Every day brought another battle with my own drowsiness.

All of this meant that my work deciphering the covenant proceeded at a snail's pace, though the fact that a text on Dark Magic came with so many warnings just spoke to how dangerous it was, so I told myself that this, too, was important work as I toiled away.

Also, a while ago one of my senior colleagues in my department had said something that helped me to rid myself of some of my worries about Dark Magic and approach it with a more positive attitude. Until that conversation, I had simply thought of Dark Magic as something evil. Anything that could be used to control people's minds must have been made by evil people to do evil things, I thought.

But then that senior colleagues told me Dark Magic could also be used to rid someone of painful memories that caused them to suffer. If used for that purpose, from that person's perspective, Dark Magic would be a good thing. The world is filled with all manner of things, and people all look at them only in one way—the way they *want* to look at them. If, instead of thinking of Dark Magic as inherently evil, I thought of how it might be used to help others, that might help me feel a bit more motivated.

After my colleague said that, I found I was able to change the concept of Dark Magic that I held in my mind. I felt so grateful to him for giving me that advice. Thanks to him, I found I was able to approach my work deciphering the covenant more intentionally than I had been able to before.

All right, time to fill up on meat, then work hard! I thought as I stuffed my face with meat again.

After we finished lunch and arrived at the room where Maria and I worked on deciphering the covenants, I suddenly clutched my stomach.

“I ate too much… It hurts. Maybe I shouldn’t have ordered dessert on top of lunch.”

Sora gave me a disapproving look and sighed.

“You can’t say I didn’t warn you. But you insisted you’d be all right, and ended up making the same mistake you always do.”

I had no words with which to refute his claim. At the time, since I had only ordered a regular portion of steak, and I have a separate stomach for dessert anyway, I was sure I’d be okay with a helping of dessert. In my case, I really am always fine as long as I’m still eating, and it seems like I can always eat more. It’s only a while after I’m finished that the suffering begins. In other words, there’s a time delay. Due to these factors, I never realize that I’ve overeaten until the pain arrives. I tried making these excuses, but the truth was I knew I was in the wrong, and these were my just deserts.

“You’re completely right. Sorry for always causing trouble,” I said, apologizing to Sora and Maria who were, after all, showing concern for my well-being.

“Please, you needn’t worry about it, Lady Katarina,” said Maria sweetly.

“If you really feel that way, have a little more sense next time,” added Sora, much more sharply.

But although their choice of words seemed to indicate attitudes that were polar opposites, they were both just worried about me. I couldn't thank them enough. A little while later, around the time our lunch break ended, my stomach had settled down a bit.

"Miss Campbell, please don't give her any more sweets today. I expect it will upset her stomach again," Sora said to Maria after seeing that I was all right. After forbidding me any more sweets that day, Sora took his leave.

No, my sweets!

I felt a little bit sad.

Since our break was over, Maria and I immediately got to work deciphering our respective covenants. Unless they were activated by magic, no text would appear on either covenant, and when that text did appear, only the covenantee could read it. In the past, before I could use any Dark Magic, I had needed to summon Pochi—my Dark Familiar—in order to activate the covenant, but since Raphael had started teaching me Dark Magic, I could do it myself. Even though my darkness was only the size of a tangerine, that was apparently enough.

First of all, I took out my wand, topped with a skull, and used it to produce a small ball of darkness. Once I did that, letters began to appear on the page. That being said, I couldn't read them at all, so it was more like a mysterious design had emerged.

Maria had already managed to learn a few things about Light Magic from her covenant, but I was still stuck at the first hurdle—reading the warnings and most basic concepts for those who intended to use Dark Magic.

True, the warnings were long, but I was fully aware of the fact that I was deciphering the text at a rather slow pace. As for why, it was because I had to look up every character one by one in the dictionary. Even the meaning of a character I had previously looked up and thought I understood could change if another character followed or preceded it. The ancient text really was a tough nut to crack. I was finding it very, very challenging.

My much more capable friends had told me that, as I continued deciphering the text, I would eventually come to appreciate the nuances of the language... But I'm sorry to say that nothing of the sort had happened yet. In school, I had only ever studied the ancient language enough to remember it temporarily, just before I had a test. Apart from that, I had mostly relied on intuition, so there were still many parts I didn't fully understand.

Anyway, I was especially bad at memorizing things like letters, so foreign languages and ancient scripts were truly difficult subjects for me. Deciphering this covenant was like a final exam in my worst subject. Back at the academy, when I'd finished my actual final exam in the ancient script—which had caused me so much suffering—I celebrated, thinking I was finally free. I never thought I'd have to face it again, much less for something serious like this.

I've thought this before, but I guess Katarina in the game must have succeeded in deciphering the Dark Covenant and using its contents. Maybe she had a really good tutor? Though, I guess I've always had wonderful friends and mentors willing to look at my homework.

In any event, since the spell on the covenant prevented me from simply copying its contents to show to someone else, it wouldn't have been possible for Katarina to have someone else read it for her. But perhaps there was still some way of cheating it?

If there is, I wish someone would tell me. Ah! Looks like I've wasted a lot of time thinking. Ummm... This character means— Wait, when combined with this character here above it, what did it mean exactly? I'll have to look it up...again...

And so another afternoon went by as I deciphered the Dark Covenant—making progress at a snail's pace, as always. The end of the workday finally arrived, and I greeted it by stretching ostentatiously. After tidying up the room where we worked on our covenants, Maria and I each returned to our respective departments.

As usual, my senior colleagues at the Magical Tool Laboratory stayed behind even after office hours, and they looked very busy. Because those of us in the Magical Tool Laboratory were asked to perform odd jobs by various other departments, we always had plenty to do. Like I did every workday, I asked my colleagues if there was anything I could help with and, if so, to please allow me to assist them. But though many of them were peculiar, my senior colleagues were also all extremely kind.

"Don't worry, this is our job," they all said, while encouraging me to go home. "Rookies should go home early and rest up."

Sora, who had joined at the same time as me, received the same treatment, so we usually ended up leaving work together.

Incidentally, though Sora lived in the Ministry's own dormitories, he always walked me to the gates where my horse-drawn carriage would be waiting to take me home. Today was yet another day where we walked side by side to the gates.

"How was your stomach this afternoon? Were you okay?" Sora asked bluntly.

"Yep. After waiting for a while, it got better. Sorry for making you worry."

"I'm begging you, learn from your mistakes already and don't do that again."

"Okay."

While I tended to think of my adopted brother, Keith, as acting like a mother, Sora felt more like a big brother.

Hmmm, I wonder why. Just as I was mulling this over, I suddenly recalled my dream from that morning. *That's it! The way he expresses his concern in such a blunt tone of voice somehow reminds me of my older brother from my past life. That's why he seems like a big brother. Although, my brother in that life looked pretty ordinary, just like I did. He wasn't anywhere near as pretty as this guy.*

This last thought occurred to me as I gazed at Sora's elegant features in profile. Then he looked back at me.

"What?"

Looking at him head-on, I thought he still looked beautiful in every respect, and sexy as well.

"Nothing... I was just thinking that you really are beautiful, Sora," I answered.

After hearing this, Sora furrowed his beautiful eyebrows.

"Huh? What brought this on, all of a sudden?"

"I was just suddenly reminded of how beautiful your face is," I said, leaving out the part where I had compared him to my brother from my past life. "You're beautiful, kind, and dependable. It's only natural that all the female employees here would be spellbound by you."

Sora, who was not only good-looking, but attentive to the needs of others, was incredibly popular with the female staff at the Magical Ministry. When walking around the office with him, I often noticed sparkling eyes trained on him, and overheard voices gossiping about him. Sora himself seemed to be used to that kind of thing, so I expected him to brush off my words like they were nothing. Instead he stared right at me, and for some reason his expression turned serious as he spoke.

"So you think so too, do you?"

Eh? What does he mean? At first I thought of letting his surprising reaction pass by, and nearly blurted out, "I certainly do." However, I suddenly wondered if something might have happened to make Sora lose his confidence. *If that's the case...*

"Of course I do. I think you're absolutely lovely, Sora," I declared firmly, making sure to look him right in the eye.

Then, in one fluid motion, Sora took hold of my chin.

"If I'm so lovely, you won't mind me doing this, will you?" His face was now very close to mine, and getting steadily closer as my body went stiff from shock.

"Pfff—"

"Huh-wha?"

"Ha ha ha ha ha! The look on your face! Incredible." Sora started laughing and clutching his stomach.

It was then that I finally realized what was happening.

"You were just teasing me again, weren't you?!" I cried, giving him a stern look.

"You're just too easy to mess with. Now I can see why the prince is always worrying about you." He was still smiling faintly.

"What? It's not like I'll just let anyone mess with me," I retorted. But Sora wasn't listening.

"Yeah, yeah," he said as he tousled my hair. For some reason, being treated like a little kid was really frustrating to me.

I didn't think our ages were all that different, but I guess he had more life experience.

However...

"That was way too sexy for a joke," I muttered, pouting reflexively. I wasn't used to that kind of thing.

Sora, overhearing what I said, muttered something as well.

"Well, it wasn't really..." was all I heard. I couldn't catch the rest of it.

"Eh? What did you say?" I asked.

"Nothing," answered Sora, tousling my hair again.

Really, I wish Sora would get rid of this habit he has of tousling people's hair already.

Before I knew it, we'd arrived at the Ministry gates.

"Thanks for seeing me off. See you tomorrow," I said, waving to Sora as we parted ways, before climbing into my carriage.

Sora casually raised his hand as he watched me leave. His face was illuminated by the evening sun, glowing red.

My carriage started back toward Claes Manor. As always, I closed my eyes and dozed off until I was back at home. When the carriage arrived at my house, the driver woke me up. After a big stretch, I stepped out of the carriage and was about to head to my room when one of the servants spoke to me.

“Lady Katarina, you have a visitor.”

“A visitor? At this hour?” It was very unusual for a visitor to come to the manor so long after sunset, especially to see me.

Who on earth could it be? I wondered, and asked who it was.

“Prince Jeord, my lady,” was the servant’s reply.

Jeord Stuart—a romanceable character in the first *Fortune Lover* and my fiancé—had blond hair and blue eyes. He truly had the appearance of the most classic fairy-tale prince. However, to my absolute shock, he did not end up seeking the hand of Maria—the protagonist—as he did in the game, but instead ended up falling for me. I was still stumped as to why he had chosen me—with my villainess face and bad grades—rather than Maria, who was pretty, clever, and lovable.

Incidentally, though Jeord had professed his love for me, I had asked him to hold off on our marriage—I needed him to wait until I had managed to evade a Bad End in *Fortune Lover II*. For someone like me, who had zero romantic experience—even in my past life—a sudden confession of love from a prince was just too much to process. I certainly couldn’t deal with it while I was busy trying to escape doom. I was such a scatterbrain—Jeord really was very patient, being willing to wait for someone like me.

It wasn’t a rare event for Jeord to come to my home without an appointment. If anything, he came extremely frequently. However, he almost never came so late in the evening. He usually visited on my days off from the Magical Ministry.

Ah! I suddenly remembered there had been one time he had come to visit very late in the evening. A little while ago, he had been targeted by a particularly troublesome noble, and had spent every day under close surveillance. *I wonder if Jeord’s in some kind of trouble again*, I thought, suddenly getting worried and hurrying over to meet him.

“Excuse me,” I called out before entering the guest room where Jeord was waiting for me.

Jeord was sitting down, but once I entered he elegantly rose to his feet.

“Welcome home, Katarina,” he said with a broad grin.

I couldn’t help but be swept along by his greeting.

“Eh? Ah, yes. I’ve just arrived home,” I replied.

“Tee hee hee,” giggled Jeord. “With that exchange, it’s almost like we’re already a family.”

Having said that, he looked at me with a satisfied expression on his face.

It’s like we’re already a family? What does he mean? That we’re like brother and sister? Is he saying that, since he only has older brothers, he wishes he had a big sister?

I only had older brothers in my past life, and had always wanted a big sister myself, so perhaps that was how Jeord felt.

Jeord noticed my quizzical expression.

“How very like you, Katarina. I might have known that you would completely fail to understand me.” He giggled. “I meant that it feels like we’re already husband and wife.”

“H-Husband and wife?!” I couldn’t believe my ears.

So that’s what he meant... Hmmm, well, I guess we are engaged, so if things go as planned we will be husband and wife. Though, Jeord was supposed to end up with Maria... But he didn’t—he’s in love with me! If that’s so, and I choose to accept his love for me, we’ll be husband and wife...

Somehow I felt myself starting to get confused and flustered. My face began to feel warm for some reason. Perhaps I was blushing.

Seeing my discomposure, Jeord giggled once again. His reaction reminded me of my run-in with Sora earlier that day.

Huh? Could he be making fun of me, just like Sora was?

“M-Might you be teasing me?” I gave Jeord a stern look right in his pretty face, though I had to look up a bit.

Jeord blinked in bemusement, then buried his face in his hands. He spoke in a strangled voice.

“No, I did not mean to tease you at all, but... Please, could you refrain from making such an adorable face?”

Eh? He wasn’t teasing me? And wait, what does he mean by “adorable”? Maybe he really is teasing me?

I cast a suspicious glance at Jeord, but with his face still covered, I couldn’t make out his expression.

Is it just my imagination, or are my ears turning a little red? I can’t *actually see them.* I shook my head in exasperation as I tried to figure out what was happening. As I did so, Jeord finally looked up.

"The reason I called upon you today, Katarina, is because there is something that I really ought to tell you." He said this all very smoothly, as if everything were normal.

I got the impression that I couldn't expect any answers if I broached the subject of what had just happened between us, so I decided to ask why he'd come to see me.

"May I ask what it is?"

If he'd gone out of his way to visit me at such a late hour, it had to be something of great importance. I gulped in anticipation.

"Though this can probably be made known to the public very soon, the truth is that, in a few weeks' time, a prince will be coming from Ethenell to study here."

I had expected something more concerning, such as Jeord having been targeted by another troublesome noble, or another girl stepping forward to announce herself as a new potential fiancée. His answer was so unexpected that I could only stare blankly at him.

"A prince from Ethenell is coming to study here? Erm, does that pose some sort of problem?"

Our kingdom, Sorcié, was the wealthiest and most advanced kingdom in the region. Because of this, nobles often came from other kingdoms to study our customs. When it came to royalty, this was not so common, but as far as I knew it was not unprecedented.

Just who is this prince from Ethenell? Who could be so problematic that Jeord would feel the need to come and report his visit to me, wearing such a mysterious look on his face?

"No, I would not call it a problem, per se, but... Katarina, could it be that you've forgotten about the Prince of Ethenell?" asked Jeord, a dubious look on his face.

Forgotten about the Prince of Ethenell? Why, I don't know any prince of...

"Ah! By the Prince of Ethenell, do you mean Prince Cezar?!"

I'd been so taken aback by Jeord's sudden visit, and our conversation up to that point, that the prince's identity had totally slipped my mind.

That's right. Cezar is the Prince of Ethenell!

"It would appear that you remember now... Though, I wish you could have simply forgotten him for the rest of your life," mumbled

Jeord. I couldn't quite make out what he said next, but judging by the slightly gloomy expression on his face, I guessed that it probably wasn't anything positive. I decided not to press him any further.

"I see, so Prince Cezar is coming to study here, is he?"

I happened to meet Cezar Dahl—the Prince of Ethenell—at the International Assembly I attended a little while ago. We found ourselves getting along very well before either of us knew the other's identity. We crossed paths again when he helped me out during the kidnapping incident that took place in the port town of Ocean Harbor. Later, I had learned that Cezar was one of the hidden romanceable characters in *Fortune Lover II*. Incidentally, I only found that out after we parted ways following the incident in that port town, so I hadn't yet spoken to him since learning that he was a romanceable character.

However, despite Cezar's status in the game, he was a prince from Ethenell, and would only ever visit Sorcié during an event like the Assembly. He would therefore have very few opportunities to interact with the protagonist. I had wondered to myself how he was ever supposed to develop a close bond with the protagonist under those circumstances. Now I realized his trip to study abroad in Sorcié had to be some kind of event from the game. Cezar and the protagonist would have an opportunity to grow closer through such events.

If that happens... There's a possibility that some doom flags might emerge.

After all, it was the villainess herself—Katarina Claes—who appeared once again in *Fortune Lover II* to stand between the protagonist and her conquest—in this case Cezar. Katarina would go so far as to commit crimes to prevent their romance, and would meet her end by being thrown in prison or slain in battle.

As if I didn't already have enough to deal with, worrying about sealing my own doom by getting between Maria and the other romanceable characters—Cyrus, Dewey, and Sora—Cezar had to show up as well. Cezar was a good person, but when I thought about his role in the game, I was overcome by melancholy. However, since I had been informed ahead of time, rather than having him just show up one day, I could prepare myself. When I considered that, I was glad that Jeord had come to visit so late, since he had done so in order to tell me.

Hmm, hang on a moment. I could see why Cezar—one of the game's romanceable characters—coming to study in Sorcié might be a huge problem for me, but as far as Jeord—who didn't even know about the game—was concerned, I couldn't see how Cezar coming here to study was such a big deal. *So why did he come over so late just to tell me?*

"I beg your pardon, Prince Jeord, but, though I do remember Prince Cezar now, I can't see why him coming here to study is such a problem."

Though I had only met Cezar in his role as Prince of Ethenell one time, he had seemed perfectly well mannered to me. I couldn't imagine him offending anyone no matter where he went. Besides, he was also incredibly gorgeous and, though he had been the subject of a great deal of attention from the young ladies gathered at the Assembly, I hadn't heard any negative rumors about him.

"I don't know that I would call it a *problem,* exactly..." Jeord began to say, then fell silent, apparently lost in thought.

This was a rare sight, so I decided to keep quiet and waited for him to continue.

"The Prince of Ethenell's visit has another objective, besides just learning about Sorcié's technology and other innovations. That objective is for the prince to find himself a fiancée."

"Find himself a fiancée?" I had not expected this whatsoever, so all I could do was to parrot what I'd just heard.

Jeord nodded firmly to confirm that point before continuing.

"That's right. Ethenell is adamant about wanting to strengthen their ties with Sorcié. To facilitate that, they are apparently hoping that their prince can find a bride here."

"Is that so?"

Because of how rich and advanced Sorcié was, there were many countries who wanted to establish ties with our kingdom. Though this was naturally the case for foreign nobles, apparently many commoners felt the same way. However, due to our kingdom's wealth, there weren't many people interested in emigrating elsewhere. It was apparently far more common for foreigners who wanted to marry someone from Sorcié to move here instead.

"Wouldn't that mean that a woman from Sorcié would end up going back to Ethenell with him?" I had heard that Ethenell still wasn't very safe, so no matter how strongly their royal family might desire this marriage, I would feel sorry if someone was forced to go back with the prince as his bride.

Jeord seemed to read my mind.

“Indeed. However, we have agreed this will only happen on the condition that a woman accepts his offer. We shan’t tolerate anyone being coerced to marry him. We have stressed that, if they commit any such offense, we will immediately shut down the possibility of any of our subjects marrying their prince. Ethenell has accepted this condition.”

“I see; I suppose that’s all right then.” As long as no one was going to be forced to do anything they didn’t want to, I felt I could relax.

“Now, this isn’t the first time we’ve had such a request from another country...” said Jeord, before launching into an explanation of how Sorcié would decline an offer of marriage from each of the other countries in the region.

In the past, if someone from Etran sought a political marriage, they were reminded that the previous king’s wife came from Etran, and that was sufficient. If a man came from Lousabre, they were told that their country was unsafe and the woman whose hand they sought was afraid to move there. In every case, our rulers had tried to sugarcoat these rejections.

In the case of Ethenell, because it had been in much the same state of unrest as Lousabre up until now, we had refused requests for marriage in much the same way. However, since its current ruler had assumed the throne, public order had begun to improve markedly. Jeord explained that, because of this, and the fact that the present king seemed trustworthy, we had not immediately rejected Ethenell’s petition.

Incidentally, the one remaining country that bordered ours, Xiarmah (a country whose culture was a bit like Japan’s), was also fairly advanced in its own right—though not quite as much as Sorcié yet—so they didn’t feel the need to make such requests.

But, due to his own country’s circumstances, it had been decided that Cezar would come to Sorcié to study, while at the same time looking for a fiancée.

“And so, why is that a problem?” I asked.

The King of Ethenell seemed to be a decent man, and we had stipulated that marriage would only be possible if the woman Cezar asked wanted it. They had agreed not to try and force anyone, so I couldn’t see where the problem was.

“I suppose you’re right,” said Jeord. “I wouldn’t really say that there’s a problem with it...” Then he fell silent again. Somehow, Jeord seemed to be behaving a little bit differently than usual. “Erm... Katarina, could you tell me what exactly your relationship with the Prince of Ethenell is?” After he clammed up for a while, these were the next words out of Jeord’s mouth. I was stunned by this question.

“Eh? What’s our relationship...?” Cezar was someone I’d met at the International Assembly and had managed to become a little bit friendly with before either of us knew each other’s identity. And after that, he helped me during the kidnapping incident. If I were being entirely candid, I would admit that he was a romanceable character in an otome game and I was the villainess who was meant to try to foil his romance. But I was the only one who would even understand what that meant, so I couldn’t say as much. “Umm... I guess you’d call him a casual acquaintance?” I finally answered.

“Eh? Just a casual acquaintance? You wouldn’t consider him a close friend, then?” responded Jeord, seeming shocked for some reason. His shock shocked me.

“Eh? No, I wouldn’t go so far as to call him a friend...” When I still thought Cezar was just someone’s servant, I might have felt comfortable calling him a new friend, but once I learned he was a foreign prince I was no longer sure if I ought to say that. Taking that into consideration, I described him as a mere acquaintance, and for some reason, Jeord appeared to let out a sigh of relief. “Excuse me, Prince Jeord?”

Jeord had displayed a series of behaviors that I couldn’t understand. Starting to worry, I peered closely at his face.

“It’s nothing, only, after seeing you interact with the Prince of Ethenell at the Assembly, I became convinced that you must be close friends. So when I heard that the prince would be coming to Sorcié to find himself a fiancée, I panicked,” he finally said, with a somewhat awkward expression.

“Hm?”

Even if Cezar and I *were* close friends, what reason could there be for Jeord to panic when he heard that Cezar was coming here to look for a fiancée? Seeing my puzzled expression, Jeord looked troubled and furrowed his brow slightly.

“We have informed Ethenell that if the prince chooses a woman from Sorcié to marry, and that woman agrees, then we will allow him to take her as his wife. Provided the woman is not compelled, and the prince has her permission, they will be married."

"Yes."

Ah, I see. So that's how the Cezar route goes in the second game! After he and the protagonist fall in love, he takes her back to his home country! I was pretty impressed with myself for being able to figure out how the game's story would unfold on the spot like that. *I'm pretty clever*, I thought.

Unaware of my internal reaction, Jeord continued speaking.

"He is visiting as a representative of his own country, so I should think he would make sure to avoid approaching any woman who already has a fiancé... However, I just thought that, if you and the Prince of Ethenell were already close, the chance of him approaching you might not be zero."

"Huh?!"

At this point, I finally realized why the news of Cezar coming here to study had sent Jeord into a panic: Because Cezar and I were already on friendly terms, he was worried that Cezar may ask *me* to marry him!

"No chance! True, we have met before, but we don't have the kind of relationship that would lead him to consider choosing me as his fiancée!" I insisted, while waving my hands dismissively in front of my face.

The fact of the matter was that, in terms of our relationship in the games, we were actually supposed to be enemies. For that reason, I already felt like I shouldn't interact with him too much. And Jeord's concerns required us to assume that Cezar thought of me romantically, which I didn't think was true. He was such a handsome man that, just by standing still, he could attract any number of beautiful women, and he seemed to have plenty of experience with them too. I couldn't imagine that someone like him would consider a woman he found lying on the palace lawn one day as a romantic prospect.

"I don't believe I have the kind of charm that would allow me to attract someone like Prince Cezar. It simply isn't possible that he would approach me as a potential fiancée!" I declared confidently, starting to breathe a little heavily.

Jeord somehow seemed irritated by my reaction.

"I know that you always maintain a low opinion of yourself in these matters, Katarina, but you have plenty of the kind of charm that men find attractive. Please try to be a little more aware of that fact.”

His words surprised me. I waved my hands even more dismissively than I had a moment earlier.

“Wh-What are you saying? That isn’t at all the case; you simply have too high an opinion of me!”

“You are incorrect. In fact, isn’t someone who finds you very attractive standing in front of you at this very moment?” said Jeord, bringing his face much closer to mine.

“In front of me...?” I muttered, not understanding what he meant.

Oh, that’s right! This incredibly beautiful prince is in love with me. When I remembered this fact, I suddenly felt my cheeks start to burn. At that point, I knew I had to be blushing.

While continuing to stare intently at me, Jeord kept speaking.

“I find myself attracted to you most powerfully, Katarina. When I think of the possibility that the Prince of Ethenell might end up just as lovestruck as myself, I simply cannot bear it.”

Jeord’s impassioned speech—and his fiery gaze—caused the burning sensation in my cheeks to increase even further. I struggled to collect my thoughts.

“S-Surely not... You’re just too niche in your interests, Prince Jeord!” I cried without thinking.

“Niche?” Jeord echoed, looking at me with a quizzical expression.

Ah, whoops. That use of the word might not exist in this world.

“Ah, erm, I mean you have some unusual tastes,” I quickly corrected myself.

“Unusual, you say? I really don’t think that’s the case.”

“N-No, they really are unusual. Normally, you would have chosen a cuter, more sensible girl.” What I really meant was that he should have fallen for someone like Maria, the game’s protagonist.

“I don’t really know what you mean by ‘normally,’ but you *are* cute, Katarina,” Jeord replied with a serious expression.

I was left at a loss as to how to respond myself, and could only open and close my mouth helplessly. After noting my reaction, Jeord smiled to himself. Then he steadily closed the distance between us. Before I knew it, his beautiful face was right in front of my eyes.

“Now that I can see that you’ve finally started to feel self-conscious around me, I couldn't be happier," said Jeord, before closing his eyes.

As his gorgeous face drew ever closer, I stood in rapt attention, thinking to myself, *Wow, his eyelashes are so long.*

Suddenly, there was a loud bang as the door was thrown open.

"Big sister, look out!" I heard someone cry as I was yanked backward. "Just what do you think you're doing here?!" cried Keith, facing Jeord as he held me in his arms.

For one moment, Jeord just looked shocked, but he quickly comprehended the situation and smiled wickedly.

"What do you mean? I was simply taking this opportunity to become closer with *my* fiancée. More importantly, Keith, weren't you invited to a soirée this evening? Aren't you home rather early?"

"I couldn't seem to get away from my work, so I ended up declining that invitation... Wait, how do you know what my schedule was supposed to be?! Don't tell me that, having heard about it, you deliberately visited Katarina at this time of night? You are a sly one."

"What are you saying? You're the sly one, Keith. To think that you would interrupt a conversation between a man and his fiancée. You are far too lacking in consideration."

"You may say it was just a conversation, but I'm willing to bet that you were just trying to take advantage of my big sister while she was daydreaming, aiming to do something untoward!"

"What do you mean, untoward? How very rude. We were only engaging in the sort of contact that should be expected between two who are engaged to be married."

And thus a row began between the two of them, with me sandwiched in between. Despite where I was placed, I felt entirely left out of the conversation. As I vacantly watched this very typical argument between Keith and Jeord, I gradually felt myself start to calm down, and the burning sensation receded from my face.

How can I explain my reaction? For someone like me, who has zero prior romantic experience—including in my past life—having an unreasonably beautiful prince earnestly whisper words of love in my ear is too much for my heart to bear.

Eventually, in the midst of their squabble, Jeord realized that it was so late that he had to be getting home. When the two of them started bickering, it often ended up dragging on quite a while. Sometimes I thought that the two of them must actually be really friendly with each other, in order to keep it up for that long.

Before leaving, Jeord smiled at me and spoke in a low voice.

"Just to be safe, please try to avoid visiting the palace while the Prince of Ethenell is studying here." After leaving me with those words, he headed home.

"Now then, big sister, are you sure he didn't do anything to you?" asked Keith with a severe expression as soon as we'd seen Jeord off.

"N-Nothing happened at all... If I had to mention something, it would be the moment his face suddenly came very close to mine and... Erm... For a moment, it seemed like our lips might touch. But before that happened, you came..." I answered, hesitating slightly.

Keith sighed heavily.

"See, I knew you were in trouble. Big sister, you simply lack any sense of peril. In the first place, when a man and a woman around your age are alone in a room together..." Keith completely entered lecture mode at that point.

How to put it? Keith looks like a sexy young man, but on the inside he reminds me of nothing except for an overprotective mother. In the game, Keith was a playboy known for seducing one girl after another. I couldn't help but wonder what had brought on this dramatic transformation. I stared blankly as I let Keith's lecture go in one ear and out the other.

"Big sister, are you listening to me?"

"Y-Yes, I am," I hurriedly replied when mom—I mean Keith—asked if I was still listening.

For someone who knows me as well as Keith does, I guess it's pretty easy to tell.

A while later, the lecture finally ended. With a sigh of relief, Keith resumed questioning me.

"Come to think of it, it's pretty rare for Prince Jeord to visit here so late. Did something happen?"

"Well, you see... Prince Jeord came to tell me that the Prince of Ethenell is coming here to study," I said, before explaining to Keith what Jeord had told me.

After hearing this news, Keith pondered it for a moment before replying.

"Though we needn't worry about the prince coming here to study, I can't help but feel concerned about him looking for a fiancée here...”

“Oh? That worries you too, Keith? Why?”

“Why, you say? The prince in question is the one you became friendly with at the International Assembly, right? Big sister, it would be disastrous if he came to ask you to marry him.”

Keith’s answer was the same one Jeord had just given me.

“We don’t have that kind of relationship. And Keith, you’ve just repeated exactly what Prince Jeord said.”

“Exactly what Prince Jeord said...?” Keith frowned, as if he found this idea distasteful. After tensing up for a moment, he finally exhaled. He seemed to have put aside the unpleasant revelation from a moment ago that he had said the same thing as Jeord. “Big sister, you have a habit of enticing men without even knowing about it. Even if you claim that you don’t have that kind of relationship, you can’t know how he feels. Did he say nothing that might indicate that kind of interest?”

“What are you talking about? Entice men without even knowing it? Surely that’s the job of the protagonist, not me.”

“Wait, what do you mean by ‘protagonist’?”

Ah, shoot. I just referred to the otome game’s protagonist. But this world doesn’t have otome games, so...

“L-Like the protagonist of a story. A cute, pretty, lovable sort of girl. That’s the kind of girl who’s supposed to fall in love with a prince,” I said to cover up my slip of the tongue. I answered him confidently, as if that much were just common sense.

But Keith gave me a somewhat dumbfounded look.

“Big sister, I never quite seem to understand your logic.” He looked like he was on the verge of blushing as he continued, “Although, you’ve certainly managed to entice both me and Prince Jeord. We’re both completely besotted with you.”

When he said that to me, I couldn’t help but blush as well.

That’s right. Jeord isn’t the only one who confessed that he loves me in a romantic sense; Keith did too. And, for the same reason as with Jeord, I’ve put making any decision about him on hold.

“Um, I already told Prince Jeord this, but you both just happen to have very unusual tastes. N-Normally, it would make more sense to choose a cuter girl!” I protested.

“You’re extremely cute yourself, big sister,” Keith said smoothly. But he didn’t manage to carry it off quite as coolly as Jeord had. His face was bright red.

Though I was in no position to talk; I could feel my own cheeks burning, so my face had to be pretty red as well.

Wh-What's with everyone today? After getting flustered one too many times, I was starting to reach the limit of my stamina for romance. If Keith came much closer, like Jeord had a short while earlier, I felt sure that I would blow a fuse in my brain and collapse on the spot. Fortunately, Keith did not approach me at that moment. With our faces still bright red, we decided to return to our respective rooms.

"In any case, please don't get too close to the Prince of Ethenell. If he says anything to you, tell me, okay?" said Keith, his face still red as we parted. Then he walked away.

What can I say? Jeord and Keith both seem to worry too much. Because they have some very niche interests, they don't realize that other people don't necessarily share them. In fact, I think they're very much in the minority. Plus, they inadvertently said the exact same things. Perhaps they have similar taste in women because they're really very similar at heart.

As I dimly considered these notions, I decided I really was going to my room this time. Once I was in my room, I changed and immediately flopped down on my bed, gazing up at the ceiling. As I lay there ruminating on what Jeord and Keith had just said to me, I felt the warmth build up in my cheeks once more.

No, no, this is no time for me to be losing my composure. In order to survive, I need to focus on the doom flags that lie ahead of me!

In just a few weeks' time, Cezar would arrive in Sorcié. An otome game event would surely commence once he did. In one of the dreams I had where I saw Acchan playing the game, there was a scene where Katarina appeared to get in the protagonist's way, just as she was beginning to romance Cezar. According to that memo I found—whose author was still unknown—success in the Cezar route would see Katarina thrown in prison, whereas failure meant that she would die after being struck down in battle against Cezar.

I wondered if I would be able to evade these Bad Ends, which had become even more severe since the first game. I sighed heavily in spite of myself. The peaceful future I had hoped for still seemed so far away.

Chapter 2: A Prince of Ethenell

It was a place that was splendid only in appearance. There were glorious buildings, each beautifully decorated, and women dressed in the finest garments. This place where the king's harem dwelt—known as the inner palace—was where I was born and raised.

The King of Ethenell at that time was known for his lustful habit of having any woman who caught his fancy brought to the inner palace, where his harem steadily grew. Despite his initial enthusiasm, the fickle king soon grew tired of these women, though it was said there were some among them who reveled in the opportunity to spend a brief period of time in the lap of luxury.

The most unfortunate women in the king's harem were those unlucky enough to become pregnant with his children. Once a woman was found to be carrying a child of the king, she could hardly be allowed to return to the outside world. It was said that some of these women—who had not even come here of their own volition and were more or less abducted and trapped within the palace—were distressed by their lot.

Although my mother was one such woman, she was possessed of a strong will. Having been taken from a troupe of traveling performers who had, by coincidence, passed through Ethenell, she was forced to satisfy the king's desires and, once found to be with child, was not allowed to leave. Most women faced with these circumstances would have spent their days weeping, or might have even resorted to taking their own lives. But my mother always held her head high and continued looking forward.

"When you're a little older, let's leave this place and travel the world together," my mother said one time, with light shining in her eyes. I knew for certain that her words were not empty. "I joined a band of travelers who came here from a foreign land, far, far away," my mother once told me. Despite the adversity she had been thrown into, she was strong, and always looked to the future.

However, no matter how strong her will might have been, there was one thing she had no way of overcoming. That was the kingdom’s climate. My mother, whose skin was as white as snow, said she was born somewhere cold. This must have been the reason she was astonishingly sensitive to hot weather. Though it wasn’t so bad in fall and winter, when summer came around she was unable to withstand the heat and frequently became ill.

Even so, she still spared no effort in taking care of me, with hopes of the two of us being able to leave together one day spurring her onward. But during one summer, in the year I was to turn six years old, things changed. Her body apparently unable to stand the heat, my mother became terribly ill and was eventually bedridden. It was during that illness that she passed away.

I was grief-stricken and nearly lost my mind, but I was not in any position to allow myself to wallow in my grief. Among the vast sea of women and children who inhabited the inner palace, I alone had no one to care for me, and no one paid me any notice. Having lost my mother, and with everyone around me turning a blind eye, I collapsed all alone against the wall of one of the inner palace’s shining corridors and nearly died.

Why I went there I cannot recall. Perhaps it was mere coincidence, or perhaps part of me wanted to sully the spot that was considered to be the most opulent, splendid, and beautiful in all of the palace. I still wonder why. My mind was so hazy that nothing I saw seemed quite real. I had gone to a place that my mother always told me I mustn’t go near. A nobler kind of person dwelt there, people who weren’t like us. Having come to that sparkling, extravagant corridor, I fell to the floor with a thud.

After a little while, I started to hear the women around me object to my presence.

“How filthy.”

“What’s he doing here?”

“Goodness me. How wretched.”

“Someone dispose of him.”

Ah, so I’m to be disposed of, like so much garbage? I thought to myself.

“Are you all right?” This voice was unlike the others. Summoning the last of my strength, I managed to open my eyes slightly to find that someone was standing in front me, though I could only see him very hazily.

“Hey, it looks like he’s still conscious. We must get him to a doctor right away,” said whoever was standing before me.

“Why would His Highness worry about the likes of him?”

“That’s right. His Highness should not concern himself with one so lowly.”

I heard other voices make such comments as those.

“Quiet. I’m in a hurry,” said the man who had stopped for me, silencing his critics at a stroke. “Just hang in there a little longer.”

As he said those last words, his hands reached out toward me. I felt the sensation of being lifted gently off the ground. My body was enveloped by a feeling of warmth and security that I couldn’t describe. At that moment, I finally lost consciousness.

When I awoke, the first thing I saw was a beautifully decorated ceiling, the likes of which I’d never seen before. My head, which had felt so hazy at the moment that I’d collapsed, was now largely refreshed. After slowly sitting up in bed and looking around, I saw that the room was adorned with many opulent decorations, just like the ceiling. The bed I had been resting on was just as luxurious as the rest of the room.

Where on earth am I? I wondered. *What happened to me? Could it be that I really did die, and this is the afterlife?*

As I sat in a daze pondering these questions, the door to the room opened with a click and a young man stepped inside.

“Oh, so you’re awake? Thank goodness. How are you feeling?” said the man as he came to my bedside. When he came closer, I could see his face had sharp features and a radiant complexion. He also wore well-tailored clothes, which looked expensive. I decided that he must be someone of high status.

“I am feeling just a little better,” I said, answering with the few polite words that I knew.

“Really? That’s good,” said the man with a gentle smile.

After that, I was cared for in that room until I recovered my strength and, even after I’d recovered, I stayed on to study and train in swordsmanship. My initial understanding was that I was looked after as a matter of course. However, once I was well enough and took the first chance I had to ask him, I learned that the man who rescued me that day and nursed me back to health was a very notable individual indeed—none other than my half brother and a potential successor to the throne.

When I heard he was in line to inherit the throne, I was shocked by the difference in standing between us and—realizing my terms of address had been far too familiar up until then—hurried to mend my manners. But this was met by a dejected look from my half brother. As he later put it, “Having no brothers from my own mother, and having had no opportunity to interact with my other half brothers, I was delighted just to have the chance to look after you, my little brother. To have you treat me so formally fills me with sorrow.” My half brother’s crestfallen look was more than I could bear, so I immediately went back to interacting with him in a more familiar manner.

Some time passed, and before I knew it my half brother had become very important to me. No, I should rather say that he was special to me ever since that day when he picked me up off the ground. My half brother continued to spoil me, as if he thought no amount of indulgence was enough, and my long parched heart was thoroughly quenched. All of a sudden, I realized that I wanted to stay by my half brother’s side and support him.

However, once I had received enough education that I was no longer an embarrassment to the royal family, and took my first steps outside the palace that was under my half brother’s administration, I came to understand many new things. I learned that many people—my half brother’s mother foremost among them—did not look kindly on someone like me being so close to him, and sought to tear us apart. The reason for their ire was that I, as the child of a traveling performer of scarcely known origins, might damage the reputation of my half brother—with his venerable bloodline—just by being near him.

When I realized this, I felt that I must remove myself from his orbit, but I knew I lacked the power to take such action by myself. I discussed the matter with my half brother’s former wet nurse—who had unavoidably found herself caring for me ever since I came to live there—and her son, who had become my best friend.

But my half brother soon learned about this. As a result, he gave me even greater attention and indulgence than he had before, and made me promise I would remain at his side.

“That man truly holds you dear,” the wet nurse told me.

I knew that, of course. There was no way I could not have known, with all the love he had showered upon me. It was because he had shown me so much love, and because I loved him in return, that the thought of my being a burden to him pained me so. Having no way to repay him was heartrending.

Thus, when I reached the age of majority at fifteen, I was determined to leave the inner palace. My official reason for leaving was that I never felt at home in the palace—a selfish reason if ever there was one—but the truth was that I didn't want to cause any more trouble for my half brother. My excessively kindhearted brother quietly accepted my selfishness and even helped me on my way.

From that day forth, I was merely Cezar. Because I was an unacknowledged child of the king's in the first place—born to a woman from a troupe of travelers—it was easy for me to claim my freedom. What I didn't count on was the son of my half brother's wet nurse—my best friend Janne—being asked to come with me. But my half brother said that he was worried at the thought of me going by myself, and he looked so forlorn that I could only nod in agreement.

Now that I was merely Cezar, I decided to become a mercenary, having heard it was the quickest way to make money. And so I roamed, hunting those who stood in the way of my half brother's ascension to the throne. I believed it was all for the good of my half brother's future. Even today, I still remember the first time my hands were stained by blood. Though I tried to act cool and rational, I could not entirely suppress the nausea I felt. I found myself repeating a mantra the following day as I readied myself to march to the battlefield again.

"I'm doing this so I can live freely. I like living this way. I don't miss the warmth of my brother's embrace. Cezar the mercenary thinks nothing of taking the lives of others. He's the kind of man who can make sacrifices in order to survive."

I kept telling myself that, went to battle again and again, and before I knew it ten years had come and gone. I finally came to truly believe the words I had told myself, and was no longer concerned by the sight of my bloodstained hands. I became convinced that I—Cezar the mercenary—would probably go on living freely, in accordance with my own whims, until my life ran out. Just when I started to think that, I heard that my half brother had finally taken his place on the throne.

Ah, so he's finally become king.

With his strong sense of justice, my half brother lamented the state of corruption that our kingdom had fallen into. He'd always said that he wanted to change it. In order to do that, all of us around him knew that he needed to become king. I wanted to help him do that. However, I knew that as long as I stayed at the inner palace, I would only hamper him. That's why I chose to leave the inner palace and hunt those who opposed my half brother, whether they came from inside or outside of Ethenell.

Perhaps these efforts of mine were of some small use to him?

All I ever wanted in return was one glimpse of my half brother reigning as king. That's all I wanted: to see my half brother diligently working to put the kingdom back together, despite having so few allies.

Then one day, my brother sent word to me.

"Cezar, I'd like you to lend me a hand," he requested.

With that, I would never again return to my life of freedom. Instead, I returned to being Cezar Dahl, Prince of Ethenell.

"Prince Cezar, if you keep standing there you might fall into the sea. Please, return to your quarters."

Though I had been thoroughly lost in my own thoughts, due to my many years of experience working as a mercenary, it had not escaped my attention that Janne, my servant and childhood friend, had approached me from behind.

"Don't worry," I replied to his warning. "That's not a problem."

But having now stepped up right beside me, Janne now lowered his voice and continued speaking in his usual manner.

"That was just an excuse. If ya keep hanging around here, it'll be harder for the new recruits to do their jobs. Now c'mon, get back to your room."

Startled, I looked around to discover that the newly recruited sailors really did look uncomfortable.

"My bad, that was inconsiderate of me," I replied, also in a low voice, before returning with Janne to our private quarters.

It still often slipped my mind that I was Cezar Dahl, a member of the royal family. When that happened, I would conduct myself in the same way I had when I was a mercenary and earn a scolding from Janne each time. I had to hurry up and mend this bad habit.

At this moment, I was sailing across the sea on a ship sent from Ethenell, my own kingdom. I was on my way to the Kingdom of Sorcié, which was on the other side of the sea. It was a far smaller and shabbier ship compared to the one I had sailed on when I participated in the Assembly. That ship had come from Sorcié, and this one bore no comparison. On top of that, most of the crew were new to sailing, so the overall experience was not especially pleasant.

Our kingdom's shipwrights were still learning their trade from Sorcié and other countries. We were assigned so many new sailors under the pretext of training them as quickly as possible, but the truth was that the rumblings of internal strife within our kingdom had caused many of the more experienced sailors to leave. The Kingdom of Ethenell was still in the process of being rebuilt.

In spite of that...

"Is it really all right for me alone to enjoy the luxury of a trip to study in Sorcié?" I wondered, the concern that had been clouding my mind finally escaping from my lips.

Hearing this, Janne gave me a look that seemed to say, "This again?"

"Look, pal. This is what His Majesty told you to do, so don't worry."

"You say that, but Ethenell is still in the middle of its reforms. Aren't there a bunch of things I should be doing back at home?"

"Yeah, maybe, but if you had your way, you'd carry on working your fingers to the bone, wouldn't you? That's why His Majesty had to order you to take a break."

"His Majesty is surely working just as hard. So how can I alone take a—"

"His Majesty has his lady to assist him now, right? Didn't she tell you not to keep overdoing it, and take proper breaks from now on?"

"Yeah, that's true..."

The one Janne referred to as the king's "lady" was now the Queen of Ethenell. I felt this form of address was a little disrespectful, but the queen was another of our childhood friends, so I didn't question his use of the term, provided no one else was around. Our current queen had been one of my half brother's few dependable allies back when he was practically isolated and unsupported within the royal palace, and shared his hopes of changing the kingdom for the better.

Immediately after his ascension to the throne, her hands had been full with the task of reorganizing the inner palace, so she had been unable to assist my half brother with his other reforms. But now that the inner palace had been completely dismantled, she was able to return to his side, along with her brothers who served as her subordinates. Following this, my half brother's work had become far easier.

However, there was still much to be done. Despite having been told to go to Sorcié and relax, I simply couldn't accept that I alone should enjoy this luxury.

"You always did think too much. Ever since you went out into the world at fifteen, you haven't enjoyed a proper break. Taking time off when you need to is part of your job," Janne declared with a shrug.

"Well, you're always with me, so you haven't taken time off either, have you?" I countered, furrowing my brow slightly as I observed Janne's carefree demeanor.

"Unlike you, I'm always looking for opportunities to rest when I need to, so it's not a problem for me at all. Don't lump me in with you," he responded. It was true that Janne had always been especially resourceful, and always dispensed with his duties swiftly, so he was able to find a surprising amount of time to relax. Having remembered this, I realized it was just as Janne said, so I was left with no retort. Janne grinned. "Besides, if you go to Sorcié, you might get to meet that girl you like. You should feel free to enjoy that kind of thing as well."

I couldn't help but glare at him.

"You're talking about the fiancée of a prince of the Kingdom of Sorcié. I can't afford to interact with her so casually," I protested.

"Eh? I only said 'that girl you like.' That's all. Who exactly are you talking about?" he retorted, grinning at having succeeded in his little prank.

When I saw the look on his face, I immediately understood that he had teased me on purpose. Janne knew that I had taken a liking to a woman in Sorcié—which was rare for me—and he also knew who she was. Perhaps he had reported this finding to my half brother. No, in fact I was sure he had. That might be why he had ordered me to go to Sorcié to study during such a busy period.

However, the woman I fancied was a prince's fiancée. If something happened between us, it could spark an international incident. I couldn't believe that our king had ordered me away to Sorcié so casually given the circumstances. Actually, it's more likely he did so only after some very careful investigation.

The engagement between her and the thirdborn prince was supposed to be political in nature, contrived to reduce tensions between him and the other princes, and word on the street said that his heart belonged to someone else. Furthermore, marrying for love had been the fashion in Sorcié for some years, and an increasing number of people were starting to dissolve the engagements their parents had decided for them in youth. I had even heard that this particular woman's decision to enter employment at the Magical Ministry was motivated by a desire to dissolve her engagement to the prince.

The king's apparently carefree directive for me to go and make friends in Sorcié might have been premised on careful investigation that turned up these facts...but I had unfortunately seen evidence to the contrary at the Assembly. Regardless of how she felt, I had seen just how intense the passion the thirdborn prince—Jeord Stuart—felt for her was. That was not the kind of passion one directed at someone with whom one was only in an obligatory relationship. That prince was unquestionably in love with her. And quite deeply at that.

Though the prince looked to me to be immature, still in the process of growing up, I sensed that he would eventually become quite formidable. I did not feel passionate enough about her myself to be willing to risk making an enemy of such a man. At least, I shouldn't have. However, since I had met her, too many things had passed between us for me to remain as detached as I had before.

Perhaps the tipping point was the moment she saw the true color of my eyes, which I usually kept hidden behind black glass, and yet she accepted my appearance without any difficulty? Although we'd only met a handful of times, whenever I thought about her I felt that the balance of my mind was upset. This may have been the reason that, when the matter of my going to Sorcié to study came up, I recalled some things that I would have preferred to leave forgotten.

I became a mercenary in order to live freely. I became a man who thought nothing of taking the lives of others. At least, I kept telling myself that in order to push my own true feelings deep down inside my heart. I could see Janne grinning beside me, but I was fed up with talking to him for the time being. I scratched my head.

"I'd like some time to myself to rest, so leave the room, all right?"

Janne just shrugged and stepped outside without saying another word. Once the door had closed, I immediately fell back onto my bed.

Janne and my half brother had told me I should go to Sorcié to relax, but of course I had no intention of doing so. For the sake of Ethenell, I aimed to learn what I could about the culture of Sorcié, which was so much richer and more developed than our own kingdom, and take that knowledge home. I would also try to form new connections with the people there. That was the purpose of my study trip. Under no circumstances was I to spend it socializing with *her*, the prince's fiancée. I braced myself for the challenges ahead. It would still be a while longer before we reached Sorcié.

★★★★★★

Despite the sense of danger I felt, thinking that a doom flag might be upon me any day now, morning greeted me all the same. According to what I'd been told, the Prince of Ethenell—meaning Cezar—had safely arrived in Sorcié and had already begun his life here as a student. But naturally, I spent my days commuting between the Magical Ministry and my home, so I had no expectation of meeting him. I thought that he might well finish his term of study here without us ever running into each other.

Though I felt a little bit sad at the thought of him bidding Sorcié farewell without us meeting even once, when I considered the threat of doom flags, I figured perhaps it would be for the best. We could meet as much as we liked in the future, once any Catastrophic Bad Ends were averted, so I just needed to be careful for another six months. After that, I would be free.

Now, with all that still on my mind, today was another workday, and I once again rode in my horse-drawn carriage to commute from Claes Manor to the Magical Ministry. As always, I slept like a log inside my carriage and the driver needed to wake me up when we arrived. I stepped out of the carriage while rubbing my eyes, then walked to the Magical Tool Laboratory, where I worked.

The Magical Tool Laboratory was said to be the number one department within the Ministry where you did *not* want to end up. When I first found myself assigned there, I trembled in trepidation at the sight of all the odd people working there, but now I was completely used to it. Though many of my senior colleagues were pretty peculiar, they were all very thoughtful people. So, far from regretting having ended up in this department, I was now very glad that I had.

When I knocked on the door to the department and entered, I found that no one else was there yet. The department was often very busy, and there were apparently even times when its workers were expected to stay in the office overnight for days at a time, but right now it seemed to be relatively relaxed. Incidentally, according to one of my senior colleagues, you could measure how busy the department currently was by how dark the bags under Raphael's eyes were—he was the deputy head of the department.

I wonder if that's really true. As I pondered this, I opened all the curtains and windows. The weather was nice today, so this let warm sunshine and fresh air into the room. In this department, we were each expected to keep our own desks and the space directly around them clean, so I started sweeping the shared space with a broom.

Early on, some of my senior colleagues were shocked to see me, the daughter of a duke, cleaning the office with a broom, but they had come to fully accept it. It was true that, due to my social standing in this life, I had tended not to let myself be seen cleaning outside. At home, however, I often brought dirt inside the manor after working on my vegetable patch, and my mother would get angry and insist that I clean it up myself, so I did a fair bit of cleaning there. And of course in my previous life I had helped clean at home and at school, so I was used to it. Besides, I quite liked taking the time to make sure my space was spick-and-span. It was particularly uplifting to tidy up when the weather was nice. And so I was happily sweeping when the door opened with a click and one of my senior colleagues who had a very strong personality entered the room.

"Morning! Thanks for tidying up," said Laura (real name Guy Handerson), as she waved her hand delicately right next to her face. Today, she still looked like a macho man, but was also undeniably girly.

"Good morning. Have you changed your outfit again?"

Today Laura was completely decked out with frills; she was always changing her outfit quite dramatically.

"Yes, I have. After I was forced to dress like a man the other day when working outside the office, I felt the need to bounce back by wearing something even cuter than normal. I got some new makeup too. Even this lipstick is a brand new color!" said Laura, pursing her lips slightly to show that they were a pretty pink color.

"That's a cute color."

"Isn't it just? I fell in love with it the moment I saw it and just had to buy it."

"Did this happen at the store you mentioned the other day, the one you really like?"

Laura spared no effort in exploring new stores where cute clothes and makeup were sold, and she'd told me about many of them.

"That's right. That store has such a wonderful range of makeup products, and they're all of excellent quality, so I really recommend it. Miss Katarina, please check it out some time."

"Hmmm. But, well, I guess I really don't know much about makeup. I always just leave my makeup to Anne, my maid."

My answer caused Laura to frown heavily.

"Heavens, what a waste for you to remain so indifferent. Miss Katarina, you're lucky to have such a pretty face, and I'm sure you'd be even more lovely if you would only try more things," Laura lamented, pouting.

Why Laura, you certainly know how to flatter a girl. "Pretty face" indeed. While my face now is certainly better than the raccoon face I had in my previous life, it is still a villainess's face.

To be fair, the maids at Claes Manor had told me much the same thing that Laura just had many times before. But whenever I went to look at one of these cute stores that were recommended to me, hungry feelings won out over sultry ones as I found myself pulled in the direction of stores selling tasty-looking food. Anne, who was in charge of my makeup, tended to accompany me on such outings, so she had apparently ended up becoming oddly knowledgeable about food and vegetable gardening for a maid, but only developed a passable knowledge of makeup. I did think that this was unfair to Anne as well.

"Hmmm. But I somehow always end up looking at food instead of makeup," I said.

Laura furrowed her brow again.

"Miss Katarina, you really are still just a child. I think you might change your tune if you ever find someone you like. Is there anyone you're interested in?" Laura asked.

As I was trying to think of anyone I might be interested in, we were joined by Raphael, the beating heart of the department.

“Good morning,” he said.

“Good morning,” Laura and I responded in unison.

Come to think of it, where’s Sora? He usually gets here before me, or about the same time. When I turned my head left and right, searching for Sora, Raphael seemed to read my mind.

“Sora is working outside the office today, so he won’t be coming in. Also, I have a particular job I’d like to ask you to take care of, Miss Katarina,” said Raphael.

“A job for me to take care of?”

I hadn’t heard these words many times before, so I cocked my head and looked back at him quizzically.

“Yes. Miss Larna asked for you specifically.”

“Miss Larna did?”

By Miss Larna, he meant Larna Smith, the head of the Magical Tool Laboratory and an unbelievable magic nerd. She was quite the character. Her fascination with magic was so strong that she sometimes got carried away and shoved her actual job to one side, so she was also sometimes a bit troublesome.

Larna has a job for me personally? What could it be?

“Indeed. It appears she is working at the palace today, so she would like you to deliver some items she needs. With Larna out of the office, I’m going to have my hands full covering for her. That means I won’t be able to help you with your Dark Magic training this morning, which in turn means your schedule should be clear, so can I entrust you with this task?”

I thought it was going to be something much more urgent, but in the end it was just an errand. With Larna out of the office, Raphael had his hands full, meaning he couldn’t help me with my Dark Magic training. Larna probably figured I’d be free anyway, so why not ask me to run errands for her?

“Very well,” I answered.

Laura, standing next to me, spoke next.

“Oh my, I wonder if our darling Miss Katarina will be all right going on this errand by herself?”

I couldn’t believe she said that.

Raphael gave a slight, wry chuckle.

“The palace is just as safe as the Ministry, so I’m sure she’ll be fine. Besides, it’s not as if Miss Katarina has as poor a sense of direction as Mr. Hart."

Yep. Mr. Hart, Laura's constant work partner (at least according to everyone else) undoubtedly tends to get lost. His sense of direction is so poor that he sometimes gets lost on his way from this office to the toilet.

"Oh my, but look how cute she is. What will we do if some foreign royal falls in love with her at first sight?"

"L-Laura..." I started to object.

Aren't you starting to sound like my grandma? You might as well have said, "My granddaughter is so cute, sometimes I worry about her."

I was beginning to feel so embarrassed that I could hardly stand it. I hoped that Raphael would say something to contradict Laura. Instead...

"I guess you're right," he agreed with a straight face. "That could be a risk."

What?! You've got to be kidding. Is everyone here a comedian?! We need a straight man... I thought to myself, my embarrassment creeping toward max levels.

"Nah, though I don't know how cute Miss Katarina looks to you, she's pretty eccentric, so I don't think she'll be that popular. Of course, you couldn't say the same about someone as beautiful as I am."

That was a perfect comeback, thank you so much, Mr. Cornish. Although, I didn't really know how I felt about being labeled "eccentric" by someone who came into work wearing frilly, billowing, shiny clothing that made everyone need to squint. *Won't you have a look at Miss Norman? She's giving you a seriously cold glare, Mr. Cornish. Please notice her.*

"Oh, but our Katarina is so cute. She's so very popular," said grandma—or rather, Laura—seizing upon yet another opportunity to gush.

You've boasted about your granddaughter enough already. Please realize that.

"Guy Handerson, you must be completely blind. But if you're so concerned about her, just go with her."

"Excuse me, why are you using my real name? My full name, at that... I'd like nothing more than to go with her, but I really don't like visiting the palace." Laura said the first part in a deep, menacing tone, but then she went back to using her usual cutesy voice.

Seeing an opportunity to change the subject, I piped up.

“Miss Laura, you don’t like visiting the palace?”

Come to think of it, I’ve never seen her go out on the kind of business that would take her to the palace.

“I really don’t. Whenever I go there, I’m treated with suspicion, and people keep questioning me. I hate it,” said Laura while pouting.

Well, I kind of felt like that couldn’t be helped. I entirely expected the palace staff would stop a strange macho-man type in women’s clothing to confirm his identity. If I were part of their staff, I would too.

“Hmph, just announce yourself with confidence, no matter how many times they question you. One day they’ll give you a nickname and you’ll have their tacit approval to enter,” said Cornish confidently.

“This guy’s nickname is ‘Frills,’” Miss Norman murmured via her doll.

Well, it can’t be that pleasant to get to the palace and hear people there say, “Hey, look, Frills is here.”

While we were having this perplexing conversation, before I knew it, it was time to get to work.

“I go there all the time, so I’ll be fine,” I declared, trying to comfort Miss Laura and Raphael, who were still worried about me.

With Larna’s documents in my hands, I set off for the palace. Given that it was Larna we were talking about, I was worried at first that I’d be given some incredibly dangerous magic tools to carry, but in the end it was only some documents. But I still wondered why there was a need to specify that I should personally deliver them.

“Miss Larna said she’d like you to read this on your way there,” Raphael said as he passed me an envelope.

The answer to my question turned out to be written inside. Aboard my carriage, I opened the envelope to find a single sheet of paper folded inside. After unfolding it, I saw that it read, “Today, I am not visiting the palace as Larna Smith. Thank you for understanding.”

In fact, “Larna Smith” was only an alias. Her real name was Susanna Randall, daughter of Marquess Randall and the fiancée of Jeffrey Stuart, the firstborn prince of the kingdom—a very notable person indeed. When Susanna made her mind up to work at the Magical Ministry, she changed her name and her appearance to become Larna Smith.

This fact was apparently only known to a few higher-ups in the Ministry, but because I had a slightly special ability to see through the disguises of people I was close to, I had learned her true identity all by myself. Recently, she had directly admitted it to me, so I was now part of the small circle of people who knew about Larna's alter ego. I must have been asked to deliver documents to her today because she was visiting the palace as Susanna. Now that I knew why, I felt relieved.

After arriving at the palace, I spoke to one of the servants.

"I have business with Lady Susanna Randall."

They seemed to have already been told I was coming, as I was smoothly informed where I would find her. It had been a little while since I'd come to the palace, but I'd been a regular visitor there since childhood, so I wasn't in danger of getting lost.

"We have a visitor from a foreign country here," the servant cautioned, "so please give him due consideration."

This reminded me that, at this very moment, Cezar was at the palace. Having been asked to give him due consideration, I was also told more or less where he was likely to be, so I resolved to keep away from him. Considering the risk of doom flags, I thought it would be better if we didn't meet for the time being.

While avoiding any places where Cezar might be, I made my way to the room where Susanna was. Though I needed to take a slightly roundabout route, I arrived at the room and knocked on the door.

"Come in," said a familiar voice.

"Excuse me," I said as I stepped inside to find not only Susanna, but Jeffrey, the firstborn prince.

I had only expected to see Susanna, but now that I saw Jeffrey I hurriedly gave him my best curtsy.

"We aren't in public, so you don't need to stand on formalities," he said with a smile.

"Quite," Susanna agreed. "You may think of this fellow as nothing more than a pebble on the side of the road."

"L-Lady Susanna?!" I cried.

They may be engaged, I thought, *but that's too rude a way to refer to a member of the royal family!*

"Don't worry," Jeffrey said with a grin, seeing how flustered I looked, "Susanna and I are always like this."

The two of them seemed very close. They hadn't seemed quite so friendly the last time I saw them, but maybe now I was seeing their true selves? At any rate, I decided not to worry, just as Jeffrey said, and handed Susanna the documents I'd been tasked with bringing to her.

After taking the envelope, Susanna checked its contents.

"Thank you. These are indeed the right documents."

"You're very welcome."

I was glad to have completed my errand without running into any trouble. However, I had to wonder why Susanna couldn't just go from the palace to the Ministry to pick up the documents herself. They weren't that far apart. I raised these doubts aloud.

"Quite," Susanna replied. "The truth is that, right now, Jeffrey and I are busy helping the royal from Ethenell who's studying here, leaving us stuck at the palace. So for the time being I'll be working here and getting anything I need delivered from the Ministry."

I see, so Jeffrey and Susanna are in charge of helping Cezar. Well, he is a royal himself, so we need to show him plenty of hospitality.

"Then you must have needed to see these documents fairly urgently," I remarked.

I figured that it must have been so urgent that she wasn't able to rely on the regular postal service between the Ministry and the palace, but when I mentioned this, Susanna was silent.

Hmm, what's the matter with her?

"It was indeed urgent...but not so urgent that I couldn't have waited for the regular postal service. However, there's something I'd like to give you, Miss Katarina, and something I'd like to say to you as well," Susanna said with a deadly serious look on her face.

I realized that I had better listen earnestly myself, and corrected my posture.

"Firstly, Katarina, I'd like to return this to you." Susanna placed an object about the size of my palm on the desk in front of her. It was shaped a bit like a hand mirror, but without any mirror set in it, and it had a decorative border around its edge.

Ummm, I feel like I've seen this somewhere before.

"Ah, that's the thing Prince Jeord bought me at that street stall!" I cried, suddenly remembering.

Susanna giggled softly.

"Yeah, this was the souvenir Prince Jeord purchased for you while we were traveling. And I took charge of this item once I realized it was a tool of Dark Magic."

That's right. I saw it at a street stall that time Keith went missing and I went looking for him—I liked it, so I got Jeord to buy it for me.

This mirrorlike thing turned out to be a tool of Dark Magic, and it ended up being the catalyst for my contract with Pochi, my Dark Familiar. After we returned and Larna (Susanna) had a chance to inspect it, she decided to take charge of both the tool and Pochi, but since Pochi didn't want to leave my side, she ended up only taking charge of the mirrorlike thing. Since the story of *Fortune Lover II* started right after that, and a lot of stuff happened, I guess I'd tucked the matter of the mirrorlike thing away in a deep corner of my memory.

"You don't need to inspect it any longer, then?" I asked.

I remembered that, at the time, Larna (Susanna) said she would need to perform all kinds of experiments at the Ministry.

"Indeed. I've already inspected it more than enough. Unfortunately, besides the fact that it's very old, I wasn't able to learn much about it," said Susanna, seeming disappointed.

"Is it really that old?" I asked. Though I had to admit it *did* look pretty old.

"Yeah, ancient as it gets. It could have been made back in the days when Sorcié was founded."

"Th-The days when Sorcié was founded? That's really ancient, isn't it?!"

It was so much older than I'd expected that I ended up shouting again.

"Having inspected the materials that were used, there's a very high probability that it was created around that time. I've confirmed the presence of materials that are thought to have been used up since then."

"I-Is that so? But I never imagined it could be that old. It's hard to believe that it's stayed in such good condition."

If it was really as ancient as Susanna said, the fact that it had only accumulated a bit of rust seemed close to a miracle.

"I think that's probably because the tool itself was enchanted. When I had Maria Campbell look at it closely, she told me that it had an aura of Dark Magic all its own, though it was barely detectable."

"Is that so? So Dark Magic kept it looking as nice as this. Isn't Dark Magic amazing?" I said in awe.

Susanna seemed to ponder this deeply.

"Indeed," she murmured. "Though we can't really tell whether this is the result of Dark Magic itself being amazing, or the person who enchanted it being amazing."

"The person who enchanted it?"

"Yeah, my investigations have confirmed that the effects of Dark Magic vary according to the powers of the one who uses it. So that is another possibility."

Dark Magic itself might not be amazing, rather the person who placed this enchantment... Oh? Moreover, though I feel like I should have reacted to this sooner, wow, Dark Magic has existed for that long?! Since the founding of the kingdom?

For some reason I'd assumed that magic had developed alongside the kingdom, with someone having invented Dark Magic much later, but perhaps it had existed all this time? What's the deal with Dark Magic? Without thinking, I blurted out these questions, and Susanna's first reaction was to frown.

"I've been wondering about those very questions myself, so I've conducted a number of investigations, but have failed to learn anything from them. Perhaps Dark Magic was deliberately concealed, but—though this is probably also due to the passing of time—not many documents still exist from the first few centuries that followed the kingdom's founding. Especially anything to do with magic."

"I-Is that so...?"

Given that the kingdom had advanced so far partly thanks to magic, why on earth weren't there any records about it?

"In the first place, the only record we have of Sorcié's founding is a very brief story that says people with magical powers sailed here from another continent and founded the kingdom. We don't even know whether that's true. Sometimes records are destroyed or rewritten by those who come after and find the facts to be inconvenient. History is just uncertain in that way."

Oh? Is that how it is? I was impressed by what Susanna had just said.

"I'm afraid we got a bit off topic... But that's how my investigations went, and I'm all out of ideas, so there's no use in me holding on to it any longer. Therefore, I thought I would return it to its original owner—you, Katarina—but supposing that you don't want it any longer, I'm happy to hold on to it. What do you want to do?”

She was talking about a magic tool, apparently created at the time of the kingdom’s founding, which had a faint aura of Dark Magic. Now that I knew more about it, it sounded a lot more like damaged goods. I looked carefully at the mirrorlike thing on the desk in front of me. It was something Jeord had bought for me when I saw it, kind of thought it looked cool, and agonized over whether to buy it myself. Considering all this, though it was a gift from Jeord, given its circumstances I didn’t think it would be rude to Jeord to let Susanna hold on to it.

Though it was thanks to this thing that I was able to save Keith, and besides—it doesn’t seem all that dangerous or evil... Does it now? Although I had no basis for this, I actually had the feeling that it was *good*, rather than *evil*. As usual, I was only working on a sort of hunch, but I found that my hunches turned out to be right surprisingly often.

“I’ll take it with me. I just feel like that’s the right thing to do,” I answered.

Susanna blinked in surprise.

“Really? Then go ahead and take it, only make sure you tell me if anything goes wrong with it. Well then, I’ve given you the thing I meant to hand over, so now we come to the matter I thought you should hear about.” Susanna paused at this moment and glanced in Jeffrey’s direction. When he saw this, he nodded.

“I’ll take over for a moment. This is actually something I’ve wanted to speak to you about for a while now,” Jeffrey explained. What he went on to talk about was the danger posed by the individual we suspected was behind the woman known as Sarah.

They were such a troublesome individual that, despite his tireless efforts, Jeffrey had still not managed to find any clues leading to their identity. He told me that this person, whose name we still didn’t know, might target me because I happened to possess a Dark Familiar. He said that he wanted me to take an appropriate degree of caution.

Though I’d been worried about the danger of Bad Ends many times in the past, I hadn’t often felt a sense of danger from any other threats. However, when Jeffrey and Susanna told me that someone whose true identity they still couldn’t discern might come after me, I felt a shiver go down my spine. Perhaps this was an even greater threat than any of the Bad Ends written into the game. I felt genuine fear for the first time in a while.

Jeffrey looked at me.

“Miss Katarina, everyone around you will do their best to protect you, but in the end, you must protect yourself. I’m hoping that you’ll think very hard about how you can protect yourself every day.”

Jeffrey spoke with such a serious expression that I couldn't help but gulp. Even so, I nodded firmly.

It turned out that these were the only two matters Susanna wanted to settle with me, so I took the tool of Dark Magic and left the two of them there, as they wanted to discuss how they were going to assist Cezar the next time they saw him. In order to return to the Magical Ministry, I headed to the palace's gates.

Susanna gave me the following piece of advice before I left: I should rely on my own magic, but also on Pochi, my familiar. It was true that Pochi, who could even turn gigantic when I needed him to, was pretty dependable, but there had also been times where he ignored my instructions and ran amok.

Maybe I should talk to him more often. After having this thought, and seeing there was no one else around in the corridor I was standing in, I quietly told Pochi to come out.

"Woof," Pochi barked energetically as he leaped out from my shadow.

He looked so adorable, sitting there looking up at me with his big round eyes and wagging his tail, that I reached down to stroke his fluffy little head. He seemed pleased and started to close his eyes.

Yep. That's my little guy. He's the cutest.

"Pochi, you see, some dangerous people might be after me. If it ever looks like I'm in danger, will you protect me?" I asked tentatively.

"Woof," replied Pochi, seeming to have understood me.

I picked Pochi up. He happily rubbed his head against me.

Ah, my little guy is just too cute. Looking back now, I remembered how, in my past life, dogs all seemed to hate me, and when the same thing seemed to be true in this life, I started to give up on the idea of ever petting their fluffy fur like this. But then this miraculous puppy, Pochi, appeared. He was so fluffy that, if I'm honest, I could spend all day petting him. *So fluffy, so fluffy, ah, his fur feels so good to stroke.*

While I was petting Pochi to my heart's content, suddenly he stirred in my arms.

"Eh? What's wrong?" I asked as he started to kick with his legs, clearly asking to be put down. After I gently put him back down on the floor, he ran off as fast as his little legs would carry him. “Eh?! Is this really happening again?!”

Weren’t we just having the loveliest time two people—well, one person and one dog—can have? Or am I the only one who felt that way…?

Though I felt sad, I hiked up my skirt and sprinted after Pochi as fast as I could. Chasing after Pochi eventually brought me to an unsurprising destination—this was my fourth visit. The uncle of Jeord and the other princes—who was also the previous king’s youngest child—lived a reclusive life in a building nearby, which had been declared off-limits. I approached Pochi, who had flopped down on a patch of grass that was only dimly lit by the sun.

“Is there something here?” I asked.

Pochi looked back at me with his big, round eyes, and wagged his tail, but said nothing in answer to my question. The fact that this was the fourth time Pochi had run away to this place made me feel sure that there was something important about it. Though the possibility remained that he might just find it comfortable because it was unusually dark.

I cast my gaze across my surroundings. The area was dense with trees and a bit gloomy, but besides that there was nothing unusual about it. Each time we ended up here before, I immediately headed back, knowing it was off-limits—but I couldn’t help but wonder why Pochi kept coming here. With Pochi at my side, I decided to take a quick stroll around the area. Curiously, now Pochi obediently walked beside me like a good boy.

Outside that patch of grass, the surrounding area was mostly bright and sunny. It seemed only that area, where the trees hadn’t been pruned and their leaves grew more densely, was left gloomy. It looked to me like, if the trees had only been pruned neatly, the sun would be able to shine through and it would be a much prettier spot. Part of my reason for thinking so came from a number of signs here and there suggesting that this area was once tended more carefully.

Though the building where Jeord’s uncle was holed up certainly showed signs of its age, when I looked closely at it, I could see it had been designed with a good deal of taste—as one would expect from a building standing on the grounds of a palace—and I could tell that someone important had lived there. It was probably because the building was so stately that the royal family had started using it, but I wondered who had lived there originally.

The last time I found myself standing in front of the building, I noticed a window was open. Then a man I assumed to be Jeord's uncle stuck his head out of the window. I only saw him briefly, but he made a very strong impression. He was so beautiful that I could hardly believe he belonged to this world. Even though I was sure that was the first time we'd met, for some reason he already knew my name, and to top it off he really disliked me. It was a pretty staggering turn of events, so I could still remember it well, even after some time had passed.

I bet the window won't open today.

"You're quite famous for being a villainess who plays with the hearts of princes," he had said before adding, "You continuously ignore his romantic advances, hurt him by doing so, and you don't even realize it? You truly are despicable."

The declarations he made about me that day were completely different from the kind of insults I'd heard whispered about me in society before—they really hit the mark, and wounded me deeply. However, because of what he said, I was inspired to think more deeply about my situation afterward, so part of me wanted to thank him. But the thought of having my heart pierced by more frank admonishments caused me to recoil slightly.

I briskly walked past the window in question and advanced through the gloomy thicket of trees, but just as I expected, there was nothing of note. Something told me that I had better not venture much further. Just as I decided that I might as well turn back, Pochi wagged his tail before dashing deep into the undergrowth.

"Eh?! Pochi, not again!"

Panicking, I hustled after him, only to see him dive into a large bush with a rustle of leaves. I knew that if I leaped into the bush myself, I was sure to get covered in foliage, so I thought it would be better to walk around it.

"Whoa, what are you doing?!"

Suddenly, I heard a voice cry out from behind the bush Pochi had leaped into.

Oh no, there was a person there?! There was nothing for it but to plunge into the bush myself. Parting the undergrowth with my hands, I emerged from the bush to find Pochi wagging his fluffy tail as he pestered a young man.

"Sorry on behalf of my puppy," I called out as I approached the man Pochi was bothering.

Then he turned to face me. He had sparkling golden hair and beautiful black eyes, dark as obsidian. This strikingly beautiful man was the very individual I'd just been thinking of. I didn't think I'd actually meet him again. Our eyes locked.

"This place is off-limits. What do you think you're doing, trespassing here?" he said icily, as he stared daggers at me.

"I'm sorry. My pet wandered in here, so I came chasing after him." I hurriedly scooped Pochi up as he ran around the man in circles. Pochi looked up at me discontentedly. I gave him a scolding look in return, as if to say, *Bad dog.*

"Don't let your pet run loose on palace grounds. You lack common sense," said the man, again with an icy glare.

"You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. I'll be more careful from now on," I said, bowing deeply.

"Now that you've found your pet, hurry up and leave. You're an eyesore."

Wow, this guy sure does hate me. Ah, but wait, there's something I wanted to say to him.

"U-Um, thank you for the other day." This earned me a suspicious look from him. *Oh? Seems like he didn't understand my meaning.* I hurried to explain myself. "When you told me I was unaware that I was hurting Jeord, I realized my behavior up to that point was wrong. So thank you for saying that."

If he hadn't said those words, I might not have ever realized my error. Since then I'd thought to myself that, if I met him again, I needed to thank him properly. I was glad to have done so. I raised my head to look at the man again, breathing a sigh of relief at having achieved my objective, only to see that, for some reason, he was standing frozen to the spot, his mouth hanging wide open.

"Erm, what's the matter?" I inquired without thinking first.

"What do you mean, 'What's the matter?'" he snapped, glaring sharply. "You must have something wrong with your brain, to thank me for saying something like that."

"Eh? But it was because of what you said that I understood where I had gone wrong, so I feel grateful," I clarified again, since he still didn't seem to get my point.

"Are you serious...? I really wonder what's going on inside your head. I knew you were odd, but not *this* odd..." Then he started muttering to himself.

I wasn't sure what to do in this situation. In the absence of a good answer, I just stood there in front of him, holding Pochi in my arms.

Come to think of it, this is my first time seeing him in full view. I guess I should expect this from one of Jeord's relatives, but he's tall and in great shape, I envy him... Ah, but something about him...

"Hey, enough already, hurry up and leave."

While I was busy being captivated by his looks, he fixed me with another icy glare and shooed me away.

"Ah, yes, of course," I finally replied, and was about to head back when I saw him already turning on his heel. Without thinking, I grabbed his arm.

"Huh? What?" he said with a severely perplexed expression.

I know what he means. What am I even trying to do here? The truth was that I myself didn't quite understand why I stopped him. It was like my hand suddenly reached out on its own.

"Eh? Erm, I just thought I might get lost..." were the words that tumbled out of my mouth.

"Huh?" He looked more and more perplexed.

"Eh? Um, somehow, that thought just occurred to me," I said, getting more and more flustered for some reason.

He scowled, then a look came over him like he was pondering something. Then he slapped my hand away and, with his hand now free, proceeded to swipe at my head.

"Eh? Eh?" I spluttered, confused, only to see leaves flutter down from my head toward the ground. It appeared that, when I forced my way through the bushes, I got quite a few leaves stuck in my hair.

He was brushing the leaves off my head, I thought, but before I could finish that thought, he had already whirled around and started walking away. *Ah, I have to thank him for getting those leaves off my head.*

"Thank you very much," I said to him as he walked away, but there was no reply.

Pochi whined sadly as he watched the man walk away.

"Pochi, could it be that you came to see him?" I asked. But, as expected, he just looked back at me with his big round eyes, and made no reply.

The plot thickens.

Feeling somewhat bewildered, I stumbled back through the palace's grounds with Pochi in my arms, until I was near the front gates. I still knew so little about that young man. I had been convinced that he disliked me, but he was kind enough to brush those leaves off my head. Pochi also seemed pretty cozy with him.

Perhaps if I ask Jeord or Alan, I might find something out, I thought dimly as I walked.

Suddenly, I heard some women shrilly saying some curious things.

"You simply must accompany me."

"Why don't you join me on this outing?"

"Please allow me to invite you to my home."

The palace isn't usually this noisy, unless there's a party on, I thought, looking in the direction of the commotion to see a number of women surrounding a single man.

The man's back was turned to me, so I couldn't see his face, but I could tell that the women were the daughters of nobles. Their gaudy dresses and jewelry spoke to their high social status. Since I was surrounded by popular guys myself, I was used to this kind of commotion, but even so, these women seemed exceptionally assertive. I might even call them pushy.

I think we may have a little situation on our hands.

As I was Jeord's fiancée and a duke's daughter, my words carried some weight. I thought to myself that I should give these women a warning. Having decided that, I got Pochi to hide inside my shadow again before I walked over to the group of women.

"Excuse me, but I don't think you should be so pushy," I said.

The women immediately turned to fix me with sharp glares. Then a few of them recognized me and quickly composed their expressions, but there were others who maintained their hostile gazes.

Looks like this might come to blows, I thought, preparing myself. Then the man the women had surrounded turned to face me. Our eyes locked, and my mouth immediately fell open from shock.

Oh, yeah. Though I should have remembered that he was currently visiting the palace, I was so overwhelmed by Pochi's disappearing act and my meeting with that young man that I had temporarily forgotten.

Here was a beautiful yet sexy man with tanned skin, black hair, and black eyes (which were actually gold in color, but he hid this by covering them with glass). It was Cezar Dahl, Prince of Ethenell. We had become acquainted during the International Assembly, then had run into each other again during the incident in that harbor town. And now he was here, studying in Sorcié. I had more or less accepted that I probably wouldn't get to see him, so I was really shocked by this sudden encounter. Cezar must have felt the same way, since he was looking at me with eyes as wide as saucers.

After observing our reactions, the women who had been circling Cezar seemed to realize something.

"Excuse me, but do you know each other?" one of them asked Cezar.

"Yes, we do," Cezar answered after a brief silence. "She was a great help to me at the Assembly, so I was hoping to see her again while I'm here."

Once again, the women all fixed me with piercing glares.

Wait a minute, Cezar. How could you say that? I'm already the subject of a lot of jealousy for being engaged to a perfect prince. This will surely make things worse! I shot a glance at Cezar to express these objections, but he evaded my gaze with a wry, carefree grin, before turning to face the women again.

"So, would you allow me to excuse myself? I will be sure to contact you again later," he said. He called each woman's name in turn, fixing them with a winning smile before communicating something to each of them in hushed tones.

As soon as he had done so, each of the women blushed brightly and said things like, "Well, that's all right then."

Then they all withdrew. His handling of the women was so expert that I couldn't help but murmur a soft "Wow."

I guess there was no need for me to get involved.

Once the women were far enough away, I spoke to Cezar.

"That was an amazing trick."

He smiled.

"When it comes to women like that, if you only give each of them a suitable compliment, and say that you'll call on them another time, you can usually escape unscathed."

That princely smile he'd just given the women somehow reminded me of how he'd been when we met for the first time at the Assembly, so I couldn't help but be my genuine self as well.

"I think it's amazing enough that you managed to remember all their names, but you said you gave them each a suitable compliment… What sort of things did you say?”

I couldn’t help but lean forward as I asked this.

Again, Cezar smiled.

“Well, as for that, I took note of any details about their home lives, as well as the dresses and accessories they were wearing, and otherwise I just relied on past experience.”

Well, looking at how Cezar is just brimming with sexiness, is a former mercenary, and is a romanceable character in the game, he must have had a lot of women wrapped around his finger before.

“I have quite a colorful past, you know… More importantly, what brings you here?” Cezar asked.

“Ah, I had work-related business here and—” I was about to announce my intention to return to the office, but…

“Prince Cezar, may I speak to you for a moment?” said another young man as he emerged from inside a building behind Cezar. He had the same tanned complexion as Cezar, and the same style of clothes. He had to be from Ethenell as well. When the young man saw me, his eyes opened wide.

Oh? Have I met him before? I wondered.

The young man smiled and stepped forward.

“Why, if it isn’t Lady Katarina Claes. I happen to have just made tea. Won’t you join us for a cup?” He gestured invitingly to the building behind him.

“Hey, Janne,” Cezar began reproachfully, but the young man known as Janne didn’t seem to hear him.

He smoothly guided me along, as I found myself unable to decide on the proper timing to refuse his offer, and so I followed him all the way inside. The next thing I knew, I was sitting at a well-laid table, with tea and various snacks arranged on top. It seemed too welcoming an atmosphere for me to politely say something like “I’m actually working today, so I really must be going.”

Still, I’ve gotta admit, this Janne guy really knows how to do his job. He led me in here so smoothly I couldn’t help but go with the flow. I’ve got to hand it to the servants of Ethenell. In any case, I’ve learned enough about manners to know that it would be rude to excuse myself without partaking at all, especially when it’s a foreign royal who went to all the trouble of preparing this spread. I’ll have a little tea and some snacks, then I’ll head back. I can’t help but be curious about these snacks—especially this one I’ve never seen before.

Janne apparently noticed my glance.

"Those are made in Ethenell, and only rarely sold outside of our kingdom," he declared.

Introduced to yet another unfamiliar snack, a new rush of enthusiasm surged through me. *If possible, I'd like to try every variety. But I'm working today. Hrm...*

Sharp-eyed as ever, Janne noticed my hesitation and inquired about it.

"What seems to be the matter?"

"Well, I'd like to try all of them if possible, but the truth is, I'm working today."

I finally told him the truth about my commitments. But at the same time, I was sure to communicate how much I wanted to eat the snacks arranged in front of me.

"Ah, I see. How thoughtless of me. But as we've already prepared these treats, I would really like you to be able to enjoy them. Lady Claes, if you would like, I can inform your workplace of this engagement on behalf of Ethenell," suggested Janne.

Certainly, if the Ministry were informed that I was accepting the hospitality of foreign dignitaries—royalty, at that—they'd hardly tell me to come back right away. Besides, Raphael was too busy to help me with my Dark Magic training today, so I didn't have anything in particular scheduled for the morning. Therefore I decided to enthusiastically accept Janne's suggestion.

"I shall take you up on your kind offer."

I mean, there's no way I can pass up this chance—this might be my one chance to try these Ethenell treats!

Next, Janne confirmed that my employer was the Magical Ministry.

"I shall make the proper arrangements," he said, then left the room.

"Thank you very much," I called as he ducked out, then returned my gaze to the snacks.

There were several varieties, but none of them looked familiar. I wondered if these were all Ethenell-made snacks that weren't sold outside the country.

Hmm, since they don't look familiar, I can't quite imagine what they'll taste like. I wonder if this one here, that looks like a gyoza from my past life, is sweet or salty. How about this one that looks like a spring roll?

As I assessed the treats with the utmost seriousness, I heard a sort of sputtering sound and looked up, only to see Cezar—sitting across from me—burst into laughter.

Eh, what? What happened? Did something that funny happen while I wasn't looking?

"Is something the matter?" I asked as Cezar continued to laugh.

After laughing so hard that he began to tear up, Cezar wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes.

"You just looked so funny, staring at those treats with such a serious expression. Those were almost the eyes of a wild animal stalking its prey." His last lingering chuckles punctuated his explanation. It appeared that nothing had happened—rather, he just laughed because of how funny I looked.

"Did my face really warrant that much laughter?" I said while pouting slightly.

"No, I'm sorry. Maybe it's the fact that I've been tense since I got here, and the look on your face helped me finally relax," said Cezar, wiping the tears from his eyes again.

"You've been feeling tense?"

He hadn't looked tense to me when he was handling those young ladies earlier.

"Yeah, though the people around me might not be able to tell, I've felt tense. After all, I've come to the great Kingdom of Sorcié—in my role as Prince of Ethenell—to study." After shrugging slightly, Cezar continued, "But when I saw that look on your face, I felt myself relax instantly."

"My face has the effect of relaxing people... Now that you mention it, one of my superiors at work told me that I reminded him of an old lady working on a farm, and that helped him to relax. Is that how you felt?" Remembering something that Cyrus had told me once while we were working on his vegetable patch, I mentioned it to Cezar, but he responded with a blank stare.

"What exactly did you do to remind him of an old lady working on a farm?" he eventually asked.

"He just said it to me while we were tending a vegetable patch together, so perhaps it was just the way I worked that reminded him of an old lady."

"You were working on a vegetable patch, and the sight of you working reminded him of an old lady... Pfft, I understand even less now."

Cezar started to laugh again. Though I didn't know why, his threshold for laughter seemed to be extremely low at that moment. I patiently waited for him to stop laughing. In the meantime, I observed the treats intently.

"Phew..." Cezar said once his laughter had finally subsided. "Sorry, I guess I got a bit too relaxed. But not just because you said or did funny things, like that story about looking like an old lady on a farm... It's just that, when I'm around you in particular, I find I can relax, and it's easy to be myself. So if possible, I'd like you to be yourself too." Then he grinned.

Hearing that he feels like he can be himself really makes me happy. In that case, perhaps I'll take him up on his offer and be myself too. After all, the first time we met we spoke to each other without formality, so perhaps this ladylike version of me seems off to him.

"Very well. I shall, then." Like Cezar, I smiled and relaxed my shoulders. When Cezar saw this, he smiled happily.

Now, time to get down to business.

"May I have some of these treats?" I asked.

For a moment, Cezar looked stunned, but then he smiled broadly.

"Of course, have as many as you like."

Hooray! Then I'll enjoy them without reservation. Umm, I guess I'll start with this one shaped like a gyoza.

"I'll help myself to one of these."

Oh, the wrapper is really crispy. But inside, it's fluffy. Hm? I think there might be some salt in the wrapper. Ah! But the filling is sweet.

"Mmm, delicious."

The balance between the contrasting saltiness and sweetness was so perfect, I could eat any number of them. That being said, there was no way I was going to pass on my chance to try the other treats.

Next, I'll try one of these things that looks like a spring roll.

I proceeded to eat the treats laid out in front of me with gusto.

"Ah, those were so delicious," I said, having wolfed down all of the treats on my plate.

"Wow, you sure can eat," said Cezar, with a look in his eyes that reminded me of a grandfather gazing fondly at his grandchild.

Once I realized that I'd zoned out while stuffing my face, I felt a little bit embarrassed.

"You see, this was my first time seeing all of these treats, so I got a bit too excited. Sorry."

"No, I was pleased to see you enjoy them so much. Moreover, since you liked them so much, would you like to take some with you?"

"Eh? Can I?"

"Of course. Which would you like? I'll have someone pack them for you."

"Umm... The one on this platter was just the best...but this one was really tasty too... This one too..."

I struggled to narrow down my options.

Cezar chuckled.

"All right, all right. We'll pack them all up for you."

"Really?! Thank you so much." I was over the moon at the thought of getting to taste the treats I'd just enjoyed again. I could even let my coworkers try them too, so I was really pleased.

"You really did get through a lot of them. Have you taken a liking to Ethenell's treats?" asked Cezar, half closing his eyes.

"Yes. They were incredibly tasty. Though the flavor and texture were unlike anything I've had before, I could get used to them. I'm sad to hear that I won't be able to buy them in Sorcié. Don't you have any plans to sell them outside of your country?" I asked, wistful over the thought of being unable to get the same treats in the future.

"Hmm. They are traditional treats, so some still maintain the old way of thinking, that it would be wrong to sell them outside of our kingdom. But if it's in service of our kingdom's development, many might be in favor of it. It would certainly be worth it to take your suggestion back home and look into it," answered Cezar, touching his hand to his chin as he pondered this. In that moment, he really did seem like a prince to me.

"If they're as tasty as this, and hard to find, I'm sure they'll be very popular. Rather, I'm puzzled by the fact that they haven't been exported before now," I said, cocking my head quizzically as Cezar furrowed his brow slightly.

"Well, after all, as I think everyone in the neighboring countries knows, Ethenell has been embroiled in internal conflict for a long time, and consequently neglected diplomatic relations with other countries. We're finally ready to move forward in that area."

That's right. As I was taught in a lesson just before the recent International Assembly, the Kingdom of Ethenell was quite desolate, and *had few opportunities to seek relationships with other countries until recently.*

Apparently the new king who had taken the throne a few years ago had finally managed to unite the kingdom, leading to a restoration of public order. This in turn allowed them to begin putting some effort toward international diplomacy.

“Now that you mention it, I did hear about that. Could it be that your reason for coming to study in Sorcié was to help you contribute more on the diplomatic front?” I asked.

I’d heard from Jeord that he was also looking for a bride, but that could also be something he was doing to serve the objective of improving diplomatic relations. I’d asked my question with these thoughts in mind, but Cezar just furrowed his brow more heavily.

“Eh? Was I wrong?”

“No, it’s fair to say that’s part of the purpose of my visit. But at the moment, Ethenell doesn’t have the power to negotiate fairly with Sorcié. In order to figure out how to obtain that power, I’ve come to see how Sorcié’s government, the Magical Ministry, and other organizations operate, and learn from their example.”

I see, so Cezar genuinely is here to learn about Sorcié. He really is in the position of an overseas student. Also, according to the game’s plotline, he’s supposed to develop his romance with Maria while studying here... I wonder how that’s going. I couldn’t help but be curious, so I thought I’d try probing him a little, and asked him what he’d been doing each day.

“I’ve visited a number of different workplaces, as well as other locations. These are limited to places that Sorcié is happy for me to see, but even where I have received permission to go and look at places, I can only be shown as many places as I have time to visit. Today, after taking a short break here, I have plans to go and visit a factory in a nearby district.” It sounded like every day had been chock-full of business, since he was touring so many places.

He won’t have any time to spare for romance, then. In fact, does he even have time to rest properly?

Cezar may have put on a show of acting pretty carefree, but I thought that he was actually working quite earnestly. He had been granted a fairly long stay in Sorcié, so I felt like it would be a waste if he did nothing but study. More importantly, I felt like if he continued to overexert himself, it might start to affect his health. I thought that would be a pity, given what a great opportunity this term of study was.

“Erm, I do think it’s important to see how people work here, but as long as you’re in Sorcié, why not spread your wings a little and enjoy a change of pace?” I suggested.

Cezar blinked in surprise at first, before frowning even more heavily than he just had.

“You sound just like my older brother,” he muttered, looking sullen.

“Eh? Your older brother? Wait, you mean the King of Ethenell?” Cezar was the current king’s younger brother.

“Yeah, the king himself said that, as long as I was studying here, I ought to spread my wings a little before coming home,” Cezar admitted, pouting slightly in a way that reminded me of a sulky little boy.

“What a nice king. So, why are you sulking?”

“Yeah, my brother might be too nice to be king— Wait, who’s sulking?” Cezar shot back, his eyes wide open.

“Well, I mean, you certainly *looked* like you were sulking.”

“Sulking? What are you talking about? I’m not a child. It’s just that our kingdom has only recently settled down, and there are still so many things to do. I didn’t feel like I alone should be allowed to come here and relax,” said Cezar, still looking sullen.

There was one thing I felt I had to say. I raised my index finger matter-of-factly.

“Pardon me for saying this, but no matter how busy you are—in fact, especially when you’re busy—you need to take the time to properly rest. If you don’t take even a little time to clear your head, you’ll end up wrecking your mind and your body.”

I had heard once that people as hardworking as Cezar had a particular tendency to push themselves too hard, eventually going past their own limits. Cezar was so surprised by my statement that he was unable to string together a retort, so I continued.

“If you carry on like that and end up collapsing from exhaustion, that would be quite a terrible thing. I think that’s why your older brother told you to take this opportunity to spread your wings, at least a little. He wanted you to relax a bit.” With that I was satisfied, having said what I wanted to say.

Across the table, Cezar was silent, his body language indicating that he was deep in thought.

Then I heard a voice agree with me.

"You are absolutely right." It was Janne, Cezar's servant. With a deep sigh, he said, "Prince Cezar never listens to me, no matter how many times I tell him to take a little break and clear his head. But now that you have said so, Lady Claes, it looks like he's finally willing to listen, and I couldn't be happier."

"Hey, Janne," Cezar began, furrowing his brow as he prepared to admonish Janne, but the servant didn't seem to care.

Yep. It's just like I thought when I saw them together earlier. These two are pretty close.

Janne expressed his opinions freely with Cezar, and there was no sign of Cezar actually punishing him for his banter, though he did sometimes tell him off. They clearly had a relationship that went beyond that of a master and his servant. Perhaps they had been friends since childhood? Maybe they had something in common with me and my friends, and Jeord and Alan?

“So, I would certainly like the prince to do some sightseeing around Sorcié, for a change of pace. Would you happen to know any good spots, Lady Claes?”

Oh, it looks like, while I was busy thinking about their relationship, I’ve been asked to say something again.

“That sounds like a good plan. I would recommend...” I began, before trailing off. I was worried that the places I would usually recommend—restaurants, sweet shops, and bookstores around town—might not be suitable for a royal visiting from another kingdom.

Though those were all wonderful places as far as I was concerned, I felt like what Janne was really looking for were some spots that would satisfy a member of the nobility.

“Is something the matter?” Janne inquired after seeing me clam up.

I decided to answer him honestly.

“Erm, I don’t know too many places I could recommend to someone of such high birth. All I can really think of are local restaurants and other shops I like.”

I thought Janne would be disappointed by my answer, but he betrayed my expectations by smiling.

“Prince Cezar would actually prefer that. He does not appear to like formal settings.”

Come to think of it, Cezar used to be a mercenary. In that case, I guess he’d be fine with normal restaurants.

“That’s a relief. In that case...”

Cezar listened with great interest as I listed a number of my favorite places in town; Janne also seemed pleased.

“I guess that’s about it,” I finished. “Though I think that’s far too many places to see in one day.”

“Thank you very much for all of your recommendations. By the way, are we likely to be able to find these places on our own, given that we are unfamiliar with the city?” asked Janne once I was done with my rundown of my favorite places.

Good point. They aren’t all famous shops, so if you’re not used to the city it could be difficult to find them.

“Some of those places might be difficult to find if you’re not familiar with the city. Erm, perhaps you could try hiring a guide.”

“A guide? Perhaps we could, but I was really hoping that we could go incognito, not as a royal and his servant, so if possible, I would like that guide to be someone who understands our— Of course! Lady Claes, do you have any upcoming openings in your schedule? What about tomorrow?"

"Eh? Well, tomorrow *is* my day off from work," I answered, spurred on by Janne's enthusiasm.

"Oh, how very fortunate. Have you any plans for your day off yet?"

"None whatsoever," I answered.

"In that case, would you be willing to be our tour guide?" Janne asked without missing a beat. "We shall pay you, of course, and will take all necessary precautions with regard to safety, so please, please accept." He then proceeded to bow.

"Okay... I accept," I said, carried along by his enthusiasm to take on the role of tour guide.

Considering the threat posed by the game's plot, I thought it would be better not to have any more interactions with them, but with a request as fervent as that, I couldn't refuse. Besides, if I put the matter of the game aside, being their guide around town actually sounded like fun.

"Thank you very much," said Janne, his cheerful expression of gratitude somehow leaving me feeling a little uneasy.

I'll have to spend today making a solid plan for tomorrow.

The whole time that Janne and I were talking, Cezar watched us with a somewhat vacant expression. Once we had finished, he scratched his head and frowned.

"I'm sorry he's strong-armed you into helping me. If it's too much trouble, please feel free to back out. I won't mind."

"No, no, I'd like to make the most of the opportunity and guide you as best I can," I declared with my head held high.

Cezar smiled kindly.

"Thanks."

Since we seemed to have resolved that particular subject, I finally inquired about a different matter that had piqued my curiosity.

"By the way, am I right in thinking that you two were childhood friends?"

"Yeah, ever since my big brother more or less adopted me, so we've been friends for quite a long time," answered Cezar with a nostalgic look on his face. But this posed a new question.

“Hm? Cezar, you were adopted? Eh? What do you mean?” I asked, startled.

Cezar, too, looked surprised.

“Oh, I thought I’d told you, but maybe I haven’t. The truth is, I...”

He then launched smoothly into a pretty heavy tale of his childhood. He told me how, as a small child in the inner palace, he lost his mother and—after being neglected as if he weren’t even there—nearly lost his own life. His brother, who was already a grown man, rescued him and looked after him from that point on. Though I had heard about his time as a mercenary, when I learned that he was a prince I’d assumed that he just did that to amuse himself, after a childhood of being doted on in a magnificent royal palace.

“Excuse me, but I have to ask: are you sure you should be telling someone like me these details about your kingdom?” I had to ask because I was concerned that maybe it wouldn’t do for someone from another country to hear about how terrible the inner palace had been, or the facts of his birth—meaning his lowborn mother.

Well, Sorcié actually went through a similar period under the previous king. I’ve heard that his inner palace was also in ruins by the end of his reign, a den of evil crawling with Dark Magic users, though this fact was hidden from all but a select few. If what Cezar just told me is similarly sensitive information, it could be a huge problem.

“No worries,” Cezar replied nonchalantly. “The extent of the previous king’s lust and the incredible scale of the inner palace are already well known throughout the surrounding countries. As for the circumstances of my birth, I’ve never hidden the fact that my brother chose to take me in. No problem there.” With a big grin, he added, “That being said, I wouldn’t be too pleased if someone went around loudly announcing my history, but you wouldn’t do something like that, would you?”

“Of course I wouldn’t, but... If I were the sort of nasty person who might be inclined to speak ill of you, what would you do then?” I admonished him, puffing up my cheeks slightly. Naturally, I had no intention of disparaging him, but originally, my role was supposed to be that of a villainess.

Cezar looked shocked by my response, but then he opened his mouth wide and laughed.

“In that case, I could only regret my own lack of insight. But, you know, due to my experience, my intuition tends to hit the mark. And my intuition tells me that you're definitely not a bad person, so I'm not worried," said Cezar, full of confidence.

Part of what I felt was disbelief, but at the same time, I had a strange feeling of unease. I wondered if there were really people who could betray someone who put this much trust in them; I knew I certainly couldn't. Well, not that I had any intention of doing so in the first place. Hoping to lift my feelings of unease, I changed the subject and communicated the first thought I had when he told me his story.

"Because of the way you act, I'd always imagined that you were doted on in a magnificent palace when you were growing up. It's a little shocking to hear that you had such a difficult childhood."

"Well, we're talking about something that happened when I was six or so. After that, my brother took over as my guardian and really did dote on me. You weren't as wrong as you think," recounted Cezar with a gentle smile.

"I see. So your brother really doted on you."

Though I still thought he must have had a hard time until he was six, I was glad to see that he had pleasant enough memories of his childhood after that to talk about them with such a warm expression.

"I was suddenly given a room to live in that was more beautiful and opulent than anything I'd seen before, and allowed to eat my fill of some very tasty food. At first, I even balked at being given such luxuries. Then I was assigned excellent tutors who trained me in academics and sword fighting, and, despite being so busy, my big brother always found time to come and check on me."

After Cezar said this, Janne chimed in too.

"And once in a while, Cezar and His Majesty shared a bed at night."

"Eh? Couldn't he sleep on his own?"

"Back in the day, Prince Cezar was afraid of thunder."

"Janne, you don't need to mention that kind of thing," said Cezar, raising his eyebrows.

Ah, come to think of it, I started by asking about their relationship, but we've got a bit off topic.

"Excuse me, but could you tell me about your childhood together?"

Once I asked my initial question, Cezar answered.

"Ah, right. Well, Janne's mother was originally my brother's wet nurse. She left upon having children, you see, but once her own children had grown up a little, she returned to work, so my brother entrusted her with my care. And she brought her youngest son to play with me—that was Janne."

"That's right. And back then, Prince Cezar was much smaller and so adorable," said Janne with a nostalgic smile, but Cezar butted in before he could elaborate.

"Wait, we were more or less the same age, weren't we?"

"Not at all. At that age, a few years make a big difference. Especially in Prince Cezar's case, since he was rather small for his age. He also had such a cute face that at first I thought he was a little girl."

"Wha— Janne, why you..." began Cezar with a look of serious displeasure.

Janne just chuckled, clearly enjoying himself.

These two really are close. More than just childhood friends...

"You two almost seem like brothers," I said.

Cezar looked even more displeased by this comment.

"I wouldn't want a brother who's always poking fun at me."

"But I think all big brothers are like that," I said, remembering my big brother from my past life. For the most part, he was always teasing me, always making fun of me—kind of a bully.

"Huh? You have some weird ideas about older brothers. My brother was always kind to me."

"Couldn't that be because the king is so much older than you? I think it's different when an older brother's age is closer to your own. Probably."

My much older brother was never half the bully he *was. Being closer in years makes all the difference. That's what I think.*

My statement caused Cezar to stop and think for a moment. His next words were firm.

"But I'd really rather not have a brother who's always joking and poking fun at me."

When Janne saw how serious Cezar's expression was and heard his declaration, he burst out laughing.

They really are close, I thought. *But you know, Cezar*, I added quietly, inside my head, *When I said you were like brothers just now, Janne had the happiest, kindest look in his eyes. Though you may not have noticed.*

Cezar then went on to boast about how wonderful his older brother was, while Janne told me a few more embarrassing stories about his childhood, so I decided to boast about my own younger brother. I told them that my adopted brother was cool, but also very dependable, and that he, too, had been very adorable when he was a little boy, looking more like a little girl. We each got quite excited as we spoke about our siblings.

When we had finally calmed down a bit, I checked the time and was shocked to realize how long we had been talking.

"Excuse me, but I really must be going."

Even though Janne had informed my workplace that I'd be back late, the fact remained that I was in the middle of my workday and it was time for me to take my leave.

"Sure, sorry for keeping you for so long when you're supposed to be working," said Cezar.

"Well, I got carried away myself, since I was having so much fun talking with you. I should apologize for taking so much of your time," I replied before bowing.

"No," Cezar said, grinning from ear to ear, "I haven't had this much fun in a long time. Thanks, and see you again tomorrow."

I held my head high.

"Please, leave it to me."

I'll have to spend tonight working on a proper plan for tomorrow. Of course, I did just receive a lot of treats, as promised. Ah, I'm looking forward to eating more later.

As for my return journey, I wouldn't have to walk alone beyond the palace grounds, so I wasn't at all worried, but Janne still insisted on escorting me.

As we were walking, Janne spoke up again.

"Thank you very much for spending time with us during your workday. Please forgive me for insisting that you show us around town tomorrow."

This was similar to what Cezar had just said. But Janne also bowed deeply as he apologized, leaving me flustered.

"Erm, well, I got a lot of treats out of the bargain, and I really enjoyed our conversation, which is why I went on talking for so long—sorry for that. And I'm looking forward to showing you around, so please don't worry about that," I said desperately, shaking my head and waving my hand furiously.

Janne chuckled.

"Thank you very much. You really are a marvel, Lady Claes. It looks like there's nothing wrong with my master's taste."

"No, no, not at all... Hmm? Your master's taste?"

"You needn't worry about that part. More to the point, thanks to your conversation with Prince Cezar, I got to see him smile for the first time in a while. Lately he's been so tense that he seems to spend all his time frowning, so I've been worried about him. Thank you very much."

"Oh, I see. He said himself that he really had felt quite stressed. Cezar seems to be quite a hard worker," I said, nodding intently.

Janne looked shocked.

"That's right. Though he might not act like it, Cezar is an extremely hard worker. I sensed this when you told him that he ought to rest more, but you can see Prince Cezar for who he truly is. Don't you, Lady Claes?"

This was such an exaggeration that I felt flustered again.

"No, no, you exaggerate—I don't see anything of the sort. I just somehow thought that might be the case."

"However you came to realize it, I think that's amazing," said Janne. After a wry chuckle, he continued, "Not only that, but thanks to you, Lady Claes, it looks like Prince Cezar might finally take a break. Really, thank you so much." He seemed so very grateful that I couldn't help but ask a follow-up question.

"Don't tell me, will this be the first break he's had since he got here?"

"Indeed. He has been unable to take even a single day off since coming here, instead filling every day with study trips, so tomorrow will be his first day off. In fact, if you hadn't arrived during our break earlier, he would have gone on to his next workplace visit after a much shorter interval. Just as you said, Lady Claes, if he pushes himself much further he really might collapse," said Janne, looking troubled.

So Janne was worried about Cezar pushing himself so hard too. Although, if he was working this hard during his trip...

"Pardon me, but is he like this back in Ethenell as well?" I asked.

Janne smiled wryly and confirmed my suspicions.

"Yes, that is exactly the case. He never rests, and is always dashing here and there with too much work on his hands. His Majesty was also concerned, and has told him to rest before, but that only resulted in Cezar working in secret. At the end of his tether, His Majesty suggested that if Cezar left Ethenell, he might be a little more likely to rest, which is why we ended up here on this study trip."

I didn't realize he was that much of a workaholic! I could tell he was a hard worker, but I didn't think he would go that far.

"We thought that, since he can't continue his regular work in Sorcié, coming here might prompt him to take at least some time off, but instead he's been obsessed with learning about how people work in Sorcié. Of course it is important for him to learn these things, so we can take those lessons back to our own kingdom, but the king himself said that his greatest wish was for Cezar to get some rest..." Janne recounted the tale with a melancholy expression.

"So you invited me to join you so Prince Cezar would take more time off."

"That's right. In the hopes of getting Prince Cezar to take even a little time off, I forced you to fit in with our plans. Lady Claes, please accept my apology."

"Not at all. Just as I said before, it isn't a problem." *I'm looking forward to it, after all. More to the point...* "Prince Cezar is really quite dear to you, isn't he, Janne?" I said.

Janne looked startled. Perhaps he wondered what I was trying to say, so I quickly elaborated.

"The whole time, you acted while thinking of Prince Cezar. When you approached me to join you for tea, then asked me to be your guide, you knew full well that, if I took you to be disrespectful, in the worst case you might face some kind of penalty. But you had Prince Cezar's best interests at heart all along, didn't you?"

The truth was probably that he felt he could participate in our conversation—despite being a servant—simply because he and Cezar were so close. But when he went on to request my help in guiding them around town, I realized that he was watching very closely to see my reaction. At the time, I had wondered why, but now I realized that he was watching to make sure that he didn't anger or offend me.

My maids and other servants knew me well, but this was more or less Janne's first time meeting me. Those who took more pride in being members of the nobility might have taken Janne's attitude to be disrespectful, and would have seen to it that he was punished.

The fact that he had continued to work for Cezar's interests despite knowing those risks told me that Cezar was very dear to him indeed.

Janne blinked in surprise.

"So you were aware of that. I must beg your pardon for my impertinence." He then bowed again.

"No, no, I don't worry about that kind of thing, so please don't feel the need to bow. I just thought it was lovely to see that Cezar is so dear to you," I said.

What I saw next from Janne wasn't any of the expressions I'd seen him make before, but a truly natural, gentle smile. Perhaps this was Janne's true face.

"Lady Claes, you are truly a wonderful person. To think you would squander such kind words on me, after I was so rude to you... I really hope you will choose him."

"Huh?"

"N-Nothing, please don't concern yourself. Pardon me. It's just as you say, Lady Claes. Even ignoring the fact that Prince Cezar is my lord and master, he is someone very dear to me." With a peaceful expression, as if he had just recalled a pleasant memory, he started recounting his past. "When my mother first brought me to the palace, I found the young Prince Cezar there, standing around as if he had nothing to do. The moment I saw him, I felt very strongly that I had to protect him. He soon became very attached to me, always following me around. I thought that was cute. In the first place, since I was the youngest child in my family, with many older brothers, I had only ever experienced being looked after. So though it may sound disrespectful, I really came to think of Prince Cezar like a younger brother. When he said he was leaving the inner palace, I immediately decided to go with him. I've always been close by, watching over him. I've seen him suffer many hardships and much anguish. So now I wish very strongly for him to find happiness." Having said all this, Janne had a kind yet bittersweet look in his eyes. Perhaps he worried that, no matter how hard he wished, that wish wouldn't necessarily come true.

I guess he would worry, seeing how Cezar pushes himself much too hard, never resting, whether he's at home or abroad.

"Please, leave it to me," I declared, hoping to comfort Janne. "I will ensure that Cezar relaxes tomorrow. And if you ever see him working too hard, and forgetting to rest in the future, I shall help you!”

Janne smiled, apparently delighted. The next thing I knew, we had arrived at the palace gates.

“Thank you very much. I’m counting on you to help Prince Cezar,” said Janne with a bow.

“Of course. Please leave the planning for tomorrow to me,” I said with a bow. Janne smiled as he watched me leave.

Considering I only came here to deliver some documents to Larna, I really ended up doing an awful lot.

Although it had only been half a day, I somehow felt quite tired. Larna—appearing as her alter ego, Susanna—had returned my tool of Dark Magic, which she now thought might have been created at the time of Sorcié’s founding. She had also warned me to watch my back. Pochi had run off again, bringing me to that forbidden place, and thus I had met Jeord’s uncle again. I ended up saying such puzzling things that I bewildered even myself. Then I had wandered into the area of the palace where Cezar was staying, and before I knew what was happening, I was having tea with him. I even ended up promising to show him around town the very next day.

Yep, even just looking at my rough recollection of these events, it really was quite a full morning. As for what was to come, I was going to return to the office, hand out some of the treats I’d received, then throw myself into my work for the afternoon. *But I think I can allow myself to doze off until then.* With some time left until my carriage brought me back to the Ministry, I let myself slip into a brief nap.

When I got back to the Magical Ministry, it seemed like quite a few people had already gone out on their lunch break. The first thing I did was to head to the Magical Tool Laboratory. After knocking on the door to the office, I entered to find my senior colleagues all enjoying their break, each in their own way. Raphael, however, still seemed to have his hands full. He was hard at work at his desk, reviewing some documents while nibbling a sandwich.

“It’s me, Katarina Claes. I’ve returned from my visit,” I called out to Raphael. His face instantly lit up.

“What a relief. You made it back in one piece. I was wondering what I’d do if you were whisked away to another country.”

I laughed. For him to have made that joke, Janne must have informed him that I was having tea with Cezar.

“That didn’t happen, but he did give me a lot of treats to take home with me. Please feel free to have some," I said, taking out the Ethenell treats and offering them to Raphael.

"Wow, Miss Katarina, you really never miss opportunities like this. What an amazing selection. Very well, I'll try one of these," said Raphael, setting down his sandwich and taking one of the treats.

"I was told that, at the moment, these are made exclusively in Ethenell. They're not quite like anything we have in Sorcié, but they're really yummy."

Encouraged by my words, Raphael popped the unfamiliar treat into his mouth.

"You're right. This is delicious," he said, his face breaking into a smile.

"Well then, how about you take a short snack break?" I suggested, thinking to myself that a lunch break spent staring at documents wouldn't afford him much rest.

Raphael looked surprised.

"I suppose I could," he replied after mulling over the idea. "Well then, I shall do just that." He gave me a gentle smile.

I set off, intending to brew some tea and set a table for teatime, when Laura appeared holding a tray in one hand.

"Hello! I heard someone mention treats, so I brought some tea."

She had prepared that tea a little too quickly for comfort, so for a moment I quaked in fear, but after carefully looking at her tray I saw there were already treats next to the tea, so I figured that she probably already intended to invite Raphael to rest, and thus had prepared her own refreshments.

"Thank you very much, Miss Laura," I said.

"I should be thanking you," she responded in a low voice. "I was just about to try and get this workaholic to take a break, so you came at the perfect time."

My assumption turned out to be true.

"Though I really am glad to see you came back in one piece, Miss Katarina. When I noticed you were late, I really thought you might have been kidnapped, so I came to Raphael to check. Tea with the prince does sound lovely, but with how cute you are, I was worried you might be taken away," continued Laura, making the same joke that Raphael had made.

"Ha ha ha, the deputy head of our department already told me that joke," I replied.

Laura puffed out her cheeks.

"Really now, this is no laughing matter, Raphael."

"That's right," he agreed without hesitation. "Please be more careful."

"Sorry for making you worry," I said apologetically.

I did consider the possibility that they were being overprotective, blinded by their love for their junior colleague—as parents might be blinded by love for their children—but then I recalled that Jeffrey and Susanna had given me much the same warning earlier this morning, so I decided to take their admonition seriously.

With that said, we had foreign treats and tea to enjoy, so we went around the office to gather the rest of my senior colleagues, who were each enjoying their break in their own way.

"Ooh, I've never seen snacks like these. Something tells me this one's a winner."

"What an odd shape."

"This frilly, beautiful one seems to suit me best."

Each of them had their own comment to make as they reached for one of the treats. These Ethenell sweets seemed to be well received by everyone, since they were all eaten in the blink of an eye. I was a little disappointed that I didn't get to share them with Sora—who was working outside the office—or Mr. Hart, who had the day off.

A little while later, lunch break was over, so like always, I went with Maria to fight my urge to sleep as I worked on deciphering the Dark Covenant. I had learned that day that the tool of Dark Magic Susanna had returned to me had probably been made around the time of the kingdom's founding, so I couldn't help but wonder when the Dark Covenant had been written. Neither of them *looked* that old, but in both cases, that might have been due to the effects of Dark Magic.

I felt like the day's events had only added to the mystery surrounding Dark Magic. Still, after I somehow managed to make a little progress in my work deciphering my covenant, I said goodbye to Maria and headed home.

Chapter 3: Sightseeing with Cezar

After heading home from the Magical Ministry and arriving at Claes Manor, as I got ready for bed, I started to think about my plans for tomorrow.

Due to unforeseen circumstances, I had found myself agreeing to be Cezar and Janne's guide for the day, but was I really up to the task? Now that I thought about it, I'd never shown anyone around anywhere before. My sense of direction wasn't as bad as Mr. Hart from my department—he was always getting lost—so I didn't think I'd take too many wrong turns, but that didn't mean I knew the city like the back of my hand. There was actually a chance I'd get lost.

And, just as I had told them today, though I had many places I would like to recommend, the number we would be able to visit tomorrow was limited. I wondered which places Cezar and Janne would be most pleased to be taken to.

If I were heading to town with my usual group of friends, this would have been easy, because, after spending so many years with them, I knew what their interests were. But I really didn't know much about Cezar's or Janne's interests or preferences, so I hesitated to choose for them. I realized too late that I should have asked Cezar to tell me more about his interests earlier today, and shouldn't have gotten so overexcited when I heard his stories about his brother.

In my past life, I would have casually messaged him with my questions using my smartphone, but here and now that wasn't an option. Having said that, it wouldn't be realistic to send him a letter and expect an answer in time either. As I struggled to collect my thoughts, I realized it was getting late, so I quickly made a list of places that seemed like they might be kind of fun, but might also be of interest to Cezar.

Also, I'd better take care not to tire him out. I have to make sure that he enjoys himself, and that he takes this opportunity to relax.

It might have been the especially full day I'd just experienced, but no sooner had I climbed into bed than I found myself starting to doze off.

When morning came and the warm sunlight started to shine through the window, I woke up. At least, I *wish* I had, but as usual, I was unable to get up under my own strength and needed Anne to come and wake me. At least I managed to get out of bed without needing to have my quilt torn away from me, so I felt I had done well.

Still half asleep, I let Anne prepare me for the day before walking to my waiting carriage in order to head to the meeting place for today's outing. While I was walking to my carriage, I briefly spoke with Keith.

"Big sister, are you going for another stroll around town today?"

"Today I'm going to be a tour guide."

"Eh? A tour guide? For who?"

"Ah... Someone from Ethenell," I said, trying to keep my response vague since Cezar would be incognito.

"Someone from Ethenell? Wait, you don't mean the prince who's currently studying here?!"

But somehow Keith still guessed right.

"That's right, but he's incognito at the moment, so let it be our secret."

"Why do you have to be an incognito prince's guide?! Tell me, what's going on?"

"Hmm, I guess it just kind of turned out that way. Now, I'm already running late, so we'll talk more when I get back."

"You must be kidding, big sister. If you leave me with so little information, I'll worry myself to death!" my adopted brother cried as I left him behind.

I was running late, you see.

By the way, though I could have just gone straight to the palace to pick up Cezar, if he was seen just strolling out of the palace, a whole platoon of guards would have come with him, and his trip wouldn't be incognito anymore. To spare him all of that trouble, we'd agreed that he would sneak out and meet me in a quiet location on the city's outskirts.

After arriving at the meeting place and climbing out of my carriage, I cast my eyes around anxiously, searching my surroundings.

"Hey," said a buoyant voice from behind me.

I turned around to find Cezar dressed in the same servant's clothes he'd been wearing when I'd first met him—in the palace garden during the International Assembly—and standing there with one hand raised as he greeted me. Since I'd already met him once before in this getup, I immediately recognized him, but he certainly didn't look like the same Prince of Ethenell I'd had tea with yesterday.

"So you're wearing that today?"

"Yeah, I am incognito after all, so I thought I'd come as a servant."

Then I suddenly realized something.

"Oh, where's Janne?" I asked, since I was sure we had agreed that both Cezar and Janne would come sightseeing with me, and Janne—who had asked me to show them around in the first place—was nowhere to be seen.

A somewhat awkward look came over Cezar's face.

"Um, Janne said that something suddenly came up and he can't come with us anymore. So it'll just be the two of us, but if you'd rather not..."

"I see, that's a shame. Well then, let's buy lots of souvenirs for him."

"Huh? Eh, does that mean you're fine with it just being the two of us?"

"Eh? Cezar, would that bother you?"

"No, it certainly wouldn't bother me, but..."

"Ah, perhaps you're thinking it might be too dangerous? Don't worry, it's actually very safe here. Besides," I added, thinking about my trusty familiar, "though I may not look it, I'm pretty strong, so please put your mind at ease."

Since Jeffrey had told me to be careful, I was carrying the magic tool Larna had made, which looked like a magnifying glass and had the power to make Pochi bigger. I was also carrying the ancient tool of Dark Magic as a lucky charm. I felt like I'd made plenty of preparations to ward off trouble.

However, despite my display of confidence, Cezar just chuckled wryly.

"Oh, no, I'm formidable enough that many of my enemies used to run at the very sight of me, so I'm not worried about being attacked."

Ah, that's right. Cezar's a former mercenary, so he's really *strong.*

"Then we shouldn't have anything to worry about," I said, though my words were met with an inscrutable look from Cezar.

Then he muttered something to himself. It almost sounded like, "I feel like I finally understand why everyone around you always has their hands full." But he said whatever it was so quietly that I couldn't hear him properly. I was about to ask him to repeat himself when he smiled and spoke again.

"Well, we have a rare opportunity to spend the day together, so I'll roll with it. Let's get going."

"Yes, sir. I'll devote myself fully to being your guide," I responded, snapping to attention.

"I'm a servant for the day," Cezar pointed out, "so don't act so formal."

"Sure. I'll keep that in mind," I responded, trying to act a bit more casual.

It was in this fashion that I kicked off my day of sightseeing with Cezar. *Our first destination is...*

"Wow, so this is the biggest bookstore in the city?" said Cezar cheerfully as he looked up at the building.

That's right, the first place I chose to bring Cezar was the biggest bookstore in town. They had a rich assortment of different books, and always got the latest romance novels in stock very early, so this store was a favorite of mine (and my friends'). Cezar had said he wanted to learn as much as possible, so I'd brought him here based on the rather simplistic notion that study must equal books, but I was glad to see that he was enjoying himself.

"Not only are there a lot of storybooks, but they also have plenty of books related to agriculture," I said enthusiastically, which earned me an eyebrow raise from Cezar.

"Books on agriculture? Why would a young lady like you need to look at books like that?"

Ah, right, I only briefly mentioned to Cezar that I keep a vegetable patch, and didn't go into much detail.

Once I was finished giving him a rough explanation of my agricultural pastime, he immediately burst into laughter. This turned into a raucous belly laugh. People started to look at this beautiful man laughing his head off. But I had to wonder, what was so funny about the fact that I kept a vegetable patch as a hobby, and spent my days off dressed in work clothes diligently tending my plot? I thought it was actually a great way to get my body moving, which was good for my health, and once the vegetables were done growing you could eat them. I thought it was a hobby that had nothing but benefits. When I asked Cezar exactly what he was laughing about, he...just laughed even harder.

Hrmm, I really don't get what cracks him up.

"Don't get me wrong," Cezar said when he finally finished laughing, "I don't think there's anything wrong with your hobby, but the idea of a young noblewoman—especially one of your status—wearing work clothes and tending a vegetable patch is just funny in and of itself. And I can imagine you happily toiling away so easily, which makes it even funnier."

It appeared that, rather than finding my hobby itself to be amusing, it was the idea of a duke's daughter working on a vegetable patch that cracked him up. *Well, people are often quite shocked when I tell them.*

"Erm, so, I think we got a bit sidetracked, but anyway, there are all kinds of books here, so I think you'll be able to learn a lot," I declared, while clenching my fists tightly.

For a moment, Cezar stared at me blankly.

"Is that right? So that's why you brought me here. To learn. Well, thanks," he said, smiling so broadly that I could see his snaggletooth.

Upon hearing Cezar's words of thanks, I felt so relieved, after having worried about every aspect of today's sightseeing trip. Together with a very cheerful Cezar, I stepped into the bookstore, and we walked around looking at all kinds of books.

Up until then, I'd only ever looked at the same kinds of books (romance novels and books on farming), but after Cezar showed interest in some books on subjects I'd never read about before, for the first time ever, I felt myself drawn to them as well. It was fun in a totally different way than walking around with my friends closely examining the latest romance novels, and time seemed to fly by.

When my stomach, always faithful to my own desires, started to rumble audibly, Cezar laughed and suggested that we go and get something to eat—so I led him to an eatery that had been on my mind. This eatery, where I often went incognito myself, reminded me of a small restaurant from my past life, so it had quickly become a favorite of mine. Even the food somehow tasted nostalgic. It wasn’t the kind of place royalty would normally visit, but I’d already been told not to worry about such things, so I eagerly guided Cezar there. Though, internally, I still felt a little bit nervous.

“This is tasty. The food here is really good,” said Cezar with a smile, which was a relief.

“Yes, it is. I absolutely love it, so I often come here,” I said happily, and Cezar smiled once again.

“Really? I feel honored to be brought somewhere you’re so fond of. Thanks.”

Cezar was smiling a lot today. And this was not the affected smile of a prince, but a natural smile of delight. Seeing him like that, I couldn’t help but feel swept up in the moment and smile myself. I was *his* guide for the day, but Cezar really gave off the impression of being my escort, or perhaps my big brother. Before I could say anything he’d settled the bill at the restaurant, and once we stepped back out into the street he bought me a snack at a nearby street stall. I felt like I could count on him for anything.

“Cezar, you’re like a dependable big brother,” I blurted out without thinking.

“Really?” he replied. “I’m so used to being looked after by my elders, I don’t think anyone’s ever said that to me.” Then he grinned and said, “A dependable big brother, huh? That’s a new one, but it has a nice ring to it.” His expression reminded me more of a mischievous little rascal than the big brother I had just compared him to, but I decided it would be better to not say that.

After we finished our meal, my plan was to take Cezar to see a farm, since earlier he had seized upon my suggestion to learn about farming from a real farmer. I knew he had gone to observe how a lot of different jobs were carried out here, but apparently he hadn’t visited any farms yet. We got in my carriage and went to the farm that was closest to the city. After getting permission to enter, we were guided to the fields. Vast and wonderful, these fields stretched as wide as I could see and promised a bountiful harvest. One day, I hoped to grow a field of crops like that myself. One field in particular, which was planted entirely with golden ears of grain, was absolutely beautiful.

“How pretty. It’s like a sea of gold. Ah, I suppose it looks rather like your eyes too, Cezar.”

Cezar had golden eyes, the likes of which were almost never seen in this part of the world. Most of the time he hid them behind lenses of black glass because—as he put it—they were a rare sight and tended to scare people. He had only ever shown me their true color once, during the Assembly, but I found them very pretty.

My comment prompted Cezar to chuckle wryly.

“Surely my eyes aren’t as pretty as this. Everyone always used to fear my eyes.”

“That’s not true. They were so sparkly and pretty!” I said firmly and forcefully.

Cezar reeled in surprise.

“Really?” he said, before raising the corners of his mouth ever so slightly. After gazing at the golden field a while longer, Cezar murmured softly, “Ethenell is still full of territory scorched by our wars, places where crops won’t grow properly. I hope it can become more like this kingdom soon.”

Cezar’s kingdom, Ethenell, was largely devastated before his older brother—the current king—assumed the throne. I was told that civil wars had erupted all over the country. Conflict had a way of ruining the land itself. And once the land was ruined, it would not immediately return to the way it was.

Not knowing what to say in response, I stayed silent, and stood next to Cezar as we gazed at the field together. Eventually Cezar, as if hoping to shake a certain thought from his mind, headed back to the farmers, saying that he wanted to ask them some questions about their fields. The farmers very kindly answered our various questions, and after thanking them profusely, we climbed back into the carriage.

For a moment I was concerned about the fact that I seemed to have put Cezar to work again, despite this being a rare day off for him, but since he seemed to be enjoying himself, I decided it was probably all right. As bountiful fields rolled past the window of my carriage, Cezar requested that we visit one of Sorcié’s orphanages, if possible.

He explained that, because of the internal conflicts that had raged until very recently in Ethenell, many children had been left without parents, and they were still in the process of constructing orphanages, which hadn’t really existed in the country before now. He told me that he wanted to visit one of our orphanages to serve as a point of reference.

Now that Cezar brought it up, I remembered hearing that Arno

—one of Sora's childhood friends—had started working at a newly established orphanage.

Although I worried to myself that this was yet another work-related visit for Cezar, he seemed to feel quite strongly about it, so I decided to show him the orphanage where I had helped Cyrus hand out vegetables.

I had stopped by the orphanage several times since first visiting it with Cyrus, so when we arrived, the teachers and the children all greeted me with smiles on their faces. And since the children were fairly used to having visitors and weren't shy about greeting them, they were also deeply curious when they saw Cezar was with me. In particular, I noticed some of the more precocious girls looking at my companion—a wild-looking, handsome man—with sparkling eyes as they asked him questions. That was really adorable.

I got a different kind of attention.

"Miss Katarina, let's play."

"Let's play tag."

"Let's play hide-and-seek."

These were the greetings I received as I was surrounded by kindergarteners. Since I couldn't really help the children with their studies, I tended to almost exclusively take charge of playing with the little ones, so I was really popular with them.

This was delightful in its own way... But whenever my friends—who were all beautiful—came to visit, the most precocious of the boys all paid more attention to their appearance than usual, and were always snatching bashful glances at my friends. However, when they saw me, the first thing out of those same boys' mouths was something to the effect of, "Hi, Miss Katarina. Did you bring us any presents?" And as soon as I handed over whatever gifts I'd brought, they would always run off, leaving me feeling a little despondent. I was certainly "popular" in a sense, but it saddened me to think how big the disparity was between how the kids treated me and my friends.

That said, there was one exception to that pattern of behavior among the boys.

"Hey, pip-squeaks, can't you see Miss Katarina has only just got here? If you're gonna play, at least let her relax for a little while first."

The one who said this was Liam, a boy who used to be a repeat offender for running away from the orphanage. When I first came here with Cyrus, Liam was a pretty wild kid, and had a terrible attitude to boot. But I'd been told that now, almost as if a curse had been lifted, he had transformed into an earnest big brother figure, dedicating himself both to his studies and volunteer efforts. Liam was the only one who didn't run off after snatching whatever gifts I'd brought. Instead...

"Why don't you go and take a break in the cafeteria?" he suggested. "I can at least get you some tea." He was really turning into such a thoughtful young man. As someone who knew what a terror he'd been before, I was delighted beyond words.

"Are you going to make me some tea, Liam?"

"Even I can handle something like that. Ah, but I won't be able to brew tea worthy of a lady like yourself."

Not only Liam, but everyone at the orphanage besides the director thought that I (and my friends) all belonged to normal merchant families, and I never denied this. This was because I worried that, if they knew I was a noblewoman, they'd feel nervous and less able to approach me. So, after getting Cezar's permission, I introduced him as a merchant I knew from another country.

"There's no need to worry whether any tea you might make would be 'worthy' of me. Though if it's way too bitter, I might just spit it out all over you," I said to Liam. I meant the last part as a joke, but, for a moment, Liam looked shocked.

"Maybe I'll make it way too bitter on purpose, then run away before you can spit it out," he retorted with a grin. He still hadn't lost the slightly sardonic edge he had when I first met him. But that was part of who he was, and I found it cute.

So, since I was going to be treated to tea in the cafeteria, I asked Cezar to join me. Having brought him there, I could hardly leave him by himself.

"I'll make Mr. Cezar's tea," said one of the more precocious girls, shrieking with excitement as she followed us.

Looks like it's tough being a popular guy.

As for me, I announced to the little ones that I was going to have some tea.

"When you finish your tea, come play with us," they said as they watched me go.

I was then shown to the orphanage's cafeteria, where I'd been several times before, and took my seat. Quite a few children were already sitting there sipping tea and engaging in lively conversation. After glancing sideways at the children, Cezar took a wider look around the place, clearly unaccustomed to what he was seeing.

"This is a fine institution," he said to me.

"They receive quite a few donations from the nobility, so they're supposed to have pretty solid facilities," I said, recalling something the teachers had told me once before.

"Do the nobles of Sorcié really donate to orphanages that much?" asked Cezar with a slightly shocked expression.

"Yeah, it's apparently seen as something of an obligation. Nobles customarily allocate a portion of funds from their work budgets for charity," I revealed, this time recalling something my father had told me.

"I see. So such a system has been developed here in Sorcié..." Cezar mused, seemingly impressed.

After we talked in that manner for a while, Liam and some of the girls came out of the kitchen carrying trays. On the trays were teacups and small dishes of cookies. To my great surprise, they had not only prepared tea for us, but sweets too.

"Sweets as well as tea? You didn't have to go to that kind of trouble," I said.

Liam then pointed at a girl who was standing next to him.

"*She* says she'd like someone from outside the orphanage to try them." The girl he'd pointed to nodded bashfully. She was about the same age as Liam, so about the age to be in the middle of elementary school. She was fidgeting slightly, and looked to be a quiet child.

"Right now," she said, "Miss Maria is teaching me how to make sweets, and I'm still practicing. Everyone here says they're yummy, but I want to hear what someone from outside the orphanage thinks."

"She actually always made sweets," Liam added, "but since Miss Maria started teaching her, she's gotten way better. We think she could start selling them." He said this proudly, as if he'd made them himself. As for the girl, she blushed and lowered her eyes.

Oh, goodness. Liam, you must learn to be more considerate. You seem to be getting pretty popular yourself.

"Oh, I see. If Maria's been teaching you, I'm sure you'd be incredibly successful." After all, Maria was already a pro, one whose sweets were so tasty that the average confection shop couldn't hope to match them.

"By Maria, do you mean the Light Magic user Maria Campbell?" Cezar whispered to me stealthily.

"Ah, that's right. Cezar, you know about Maria then?" I whispered back.

"Well, she's famous. I haven't actually met her though."

That's right, Cezar and Maria haven't met yet.

Within the story of the game, they were supposed to have met at the Assembly, but I may have come between them. Moreover, today's sightseeing trip was probably a game event as well, so I might have stolen it from Maria. When I considered that, I really felt like a meddling villainess. Perhaps I ought to be more careful. However, if Cezar did meet Maria, would he necessarily fall in love with her, as Cyrus and Dewey had?

Well, there was no point in pondering the question now. My more pressing concern was that the tea Liam had gone to the trouble of making me was in danger of going cold.

"Well then, let's have a taste," I said, before taking a sip of tea to moisten my throat. Though I had joked about it turning out too bitter, the tea Liam had brewed was actually delicious. My thirst steadily receded. "Yep. This is really tasty. Thanks, Liam," I said.

The corners of Liam's mouth immediately curled up in a smile.

To follow the tea, I tried one of the sweets made by the girl Maria was teaching. In terms of appearance, it was just a simple cookie, but after popping it in my mouth, I was surprised by its perfect crispness and the fragrant sweetness that spread across my taste buds.

"This is really tasty too. You could certainly sell these, and I'm sure they'd be very popular too!" I cried as I nearly doubled over from the effect of the cookie's deliciousness. When the girl who'd made it heard this, her face instantly lit up like a flower blooming in the sun.

"Whoa, looks like you have a real lady's approval. Now you can get a job in a sweets store, no sweat," Liam said to the girl with a smile, causing her to turn red again.

Yep, now I can say for certain that she's crushing on Liam. This adorable budding romance is making me feel all warm and fuzzy.

"Yep, they honestly are very tasty, so I think any confectionery would hire you on the spot," I said.

“Thank you very much,” the girl replied bashfully, bowing her head.

Some of the other kids in the cafeteria must have overheard our conversation, since several of them piped up to tell us what they wanted to be when they grew up; each one of them had a different dream.

“I’d like to learn to sew properly and become a dressmaker one day.”

“I like studying, so I hope I can become a scholar.”

“I’m gonna learn to use a sword and become a knight.”

Yeah. That’s good. I can’t help but want to cheer on youngsters who have their own dreams.

While I was looking at the children with a certain glint in my eye, like an old lady from the neighborhood, Cezar spoke to me again.

“So they don’t only teach academic subjects here, but all sorts of skills, huh?” He appeared quite struck by this revelation.

“Yes, that’s right. Though of course they need some book-learning to be independent when they come of age, they’re also taught the basics of the domestic skills they’ll need to live by themselves, like cooking and sewing. And apparently they sometimes have people come in to teach a variety of other subjects, so that those who want to learn more have the opportunity to do so,” I explained, telling Cezar what the director of the orphanage had once told me.

“That’s amazing. So even orphans have the chance to pursue their own dreams by studying in depth,” said Cezar, half closing his eyes as if dazzled by something bright.

I was curious what he meant, so I asked him. According to Cezar, orphanages in Ethenell had their work cut out for them just trying to look after their children’s basic daily needs, which made it difficult to educate them properly. Cezar already seemed to have understood that there was a big difference between a kingdom like Ethenell—which hadn’t functioned properly until very recently—and Sorcié, which had developed steadily during a long period of peace, but he still seemed uncomfortable talking about his own country’s circumstances.

“What can I do to help the people of Ethenell live happier lives?” Cezar murmured with a pained expression.

Cezar really does think deeply about his country and the people who *live there, huh? That's why he never takes a break from his work, and is desperate to learn even on a trip abroad.* I thought his dedication was wonderful, but I also worried that his approach was starting to endanger his own health. I could understand why Janne and his king were concerned. In any case, the question of what Cezar could do to help the people of Ethenell live happier lives was a difficult one, and not one I felt I could answer. But I did find myself wanting to say one thing. *What I'd like to say is...*

"I don't think that's the kind of thing you can work out right here, all by yourself, Cezar. Once you return to your country, speak with your older brother and the other people you trust. I think you'll be much better off discussing this with everyone else and then thinking about it. This surely isn't the kind of problem you should have to deal with on your own," I declared firmly.

Cezar goggled at me, stiffened briefly, then he suddenly laughed.

"You're right. It's not something I can think through all by myself. Just as you say, I ought to discuss it with other people once I return home."

"Please do exactly that. I find that when you try to figure things out by yourself, you often end up making mistakes," I said, trying to make sure he got the message that he mustn't overdo it and should take breaks when he needed to.

"I guess so. Thanks for the advice." He then smiled and nodded.

I hadn't expected him to accept my advice so earnestly, let alone thank me, so I got flustered and waved my hand dismissively.

"No, no, no. I wouldn't call that advice, just a little thought that came to me..."

How can I put it... Cezar is a very generous sort of guy. I can hardly believe that he'd respond so seriously to the ramblings of a young lady from a foreign land. I spent a moment being impressed by Cezar.

"Hey, mister, are you from Ethenell?" asked Liam, looking straight at Cezar. It appeared that he had been listening to our conversation.

With a warm expression, Cezar looked at Liam and nodded.

"Yeah, that's right."

"I thought so. I used to live in Ethenell too, before I came here. Will you be going back there, mister?"

"I see, so you're from Ethenell. As for me, I'm just here for work, and so I do plan to return to Ethenell."

“Huh… What is it like now? Is the war over?” asked Liam.

I felt like I saw Cezar’s expression darken slightly after this question, but he maintained the same cheerful tone of voice to hide his reaction from Liam.

“The wars that raged on for so long have not all ended, but they are mostly over. Right now, we’re working on rebuilding the kingdom.”

Liam’s face lit up when he heard this.

“Really? Then I bet there aren’t so many bandits now either. My dad used to tell me there were so many bandits because the war went on for so long.”

“Right,” Cezar responded. “There were some who took advantage of the wars, and others who lost everything because of them and had to steal in order to survive. So we saw more and more bandits as the wars continued. But I’m sure there are fewer now.”

“I hope so. That means there’ll be fewer kids like me,” said Liam happily.

That’s right… I did hear that both of Liam’s parents lost their lives to bandits.

Cezar seemed to immediately realize this based on what Liam had said.

“Wait, do you mean to say… Did you lose your parents to bandits?” he asked with some hesitation.

“Yeah. My dad, my mom, my brother, my sister… They killed everyone who lived in my village. I only survived because everyone else protected me. Then I went to the slums for a while, living like an animal. I was picked up off the streets one day, and a lot of stuff happened, but I ended up being brought here,” said Liam matter-of-factly.

I’d been told that, when Liam shared his story in the past, it had pained him to do so, but he didn’t seem to feel that way anymore. When I’d had the chance to ask him why, he told me that he had decided to keep looking forward and make the most of his life. At the time, I thought Liam was really strong, despite being such a small child.

But when Cezar heard his story, his expression grew dark and his brow furrowed.

“I’m sorry.” He bowed deeply to Liam after saying this.

Liam’s eyes widened in surprise.

"Eh? Why are you apologizing, mister?"

That's a good question. I thought that Cezar was probably apologizing on behalf of Ethenell's royal family, but we were supposed to be merchants right now. Cezar was just a merchant from Ethenell.

Cezar gasped as Liam's question drew his attention to that fact. When he remembered he was hiding his true identity, he stopped to think for a moment.

"I'm apologizing on behalf of all the grown-ups of Ethenell. We weren't able to protect kids like you."

When Liam heard this, he smiled so widely that we could see his teeth.

"Just because you're a grown-up, that doesn't mean you could have done anything about it, right? I don't need an apology. I'd much rather that you work hard to make Ethenell better. That way there won't be any more kids like me."

Cezar cast his eyes down slightly, as if digesting Liam's words.

"Yeah, I'll work as hard as I can. Thanks," said Cezar. He paused for a moment, then asked Liam, "How about you? Are you going to live in Sorcié from now on?"

His face seemed to suggest that Cezar thought he already knew the answer to his question. He definitely seemed to think that Liam would answer "Yes." But, having spoken to Liam before, I knew otherwise.

"Nope, once I'm old enough and I've saved some money, I plan to go back to Ethenell," Liam said firmly.

It was Cezar's turn to look surprised.

"Why would you go back? Isn't Sorcié a richer place, and easier to live in?"

"Yeah... Well, I think that's true, but since running away from my village when it was burned to the ground, I've never been back to the place I grew up. So I'd like to go back and see it for myself," said Liam while scratching the tip of his nose. Cezar listened intently as Liam continued. "Besides, I've heard that the new King of Ethenell is working hard to make the country a better place. So I'm sure that by the time I get there, it will already be better than before. I'd like to use the things I've learned here in Sorcié and do my own part to make Ethenell better. That's my dream at the moment," said Liam, before chuckling shyly.

When I'd first met Liam some time ago, he had been quite a wild child, but now that he had spent some time studying, he'd really changed a lot. He seemed to have gotten cleverer and cleverer, absorbing knowledge like a dry sponge soaking up water, and his view of the world had also expanded. When I'd visited him not too long ago, he'd told me much the same thing. But this was the first time I'd heard him call these plans his dream. Hearing that really made me happy.

"I'm glad you found yourself a dream," I said, unable to keep myself from smiling.

"Well," Liam replied bashfully, "I have one for the time being, anyway."

Then I realized Cezar still hadn't said anything in response, so I glanced over to see why he remained silent. He was looking up with an expression that suggested he was desperately trying to suppress some emotion.

Umm, I wonder what he's struggling with. When I looked more closely, I could see his eyes were ever so slightly moist. *Eh? Don't tell me he's trying not to cry!*

If that was the case, I could understand why he was looking up. Perhaps he was trying to stop the tears welling in his eyes from overflowing. Given how Liam's story had unfolded, I couldn't imagine that Cezar was still sad or frustrated. In that case, his tears must be welling up from joy. I hoped that was the case.

Liam, who was only just meeting Cezar for the first time, couldn't have been expected to fully understand this subtle change in his emotions, but he gave the silent Cezar a perplexed look.

"Mister, what's the matter?"

This seemed to snap Cezar out of his thoughts. He looked straight at Liam.

"Ah, nothing. I was just happy to hear you say that. If we have more people like you in Ethenell, I know it can become a better place. I promise to work my very hardest too."

Looks like Cezar really was happy to hear what Liam said. I'm glad.

Liam seemed a bit bashful after hearing Cezar's response.

"Sure, mister."

Cezar and Liam then began a prolonged conversation about Ethenell, and at first I thought I might listen to them, but then a girl called to me.

"Over here, over here," she said.

When I followed her, I found the girls who had been following

Cezar earlier all huddled together. They seemed to have enough manners to know to give him some space. They really were quite mature for their age.

The girls then encircled me. I'd been surrounded by the little ones many times before, but this was my first time being surrounded by slightly older girls.

"Ummm... What's going on?" I asked the girl who had summoned me.

"Miss Katarina, how do you know that man?" she asked in return, leaning toward me.

"U-Umm... We're just friends," I answered. I could hardly tell her that I was a tour guide for a foreign prince.

"Is that so? Since you came here together, I thought he might be your boyfriend," she said coolly.

I was so shocked that I stood there with my mouth hanging open. The group of girls then continued their conversation, glancing contemptuously at me as I stood frozen to the spot.

"Didn't I tell you? Miss Katarina is with Mr. Jeord, so she couldn't be going out with *him*."

"Eh? I thought Mr. Keith was her boyfriend."

"Didn't I tell you that they're brother and sister?"

"No, when I asked you about it you told me that he's her *adopted* brother, so they could still be secret lovers."

"But she could still be going out with Mr. Alan, right?"

"What about Mr. Nicol?"

The girls were all squealing and seemed to be having a great deal of fun, while I felt like running away.

I can't believe my relationships with my brother and my friends looked that way to them. Girls these days sure are precocious.

"But Mr. Jeord *definitely* likes Miss Katarina."

"Well, so does Mr. Keith."

After saying these words, two of the girls looked at me expectantly.

Oof. I'm still dealing with that situation, and it's a touchy subject for me. Come to think of it, I didn't realize these facts for the longest time, so how did these girls know? They must be really perceptive. What is with kids these days?

"Hey, Miss Katarina, which of them do you like?"

"Have either of them confessed their love to you?"

The girls' eyes shone as they continued to press me for answers.

So I ran.

"Ah, wait!"

"She's running away!"

I ran as fast as my legs could carry me. I got the feeling that I couldn't deal with those precocious girls any longer, burst out of the cafeteria, and kept running until I was all the way outside. As an adult, I couldn't help but feel a bit embarrassed by my own conduct, but it was the only way I could think of to evade their pointed questions.

Relieved to find that the girls had not in fact chased me outside, I looked around the garden and spotted some of the little ones playing tag. *I really am more suited to little kids around this age. I just can't keep up with kids after they've grown a bit older.*

"Let me play too," I said, while walking over to where the little kids were playing.

They cried out for joy and came up to me with smiles on their faces.

"Have you finished your tea?"

"We were playing tag."

"I didn't get caught, not even once."

They were all so desperate to talk to me. It was truly adorable.

"I've finished my tea, so is it okay if I play too?"

"Sure!" they all cried.

And so I ended up joining them in their game of tag. Though they might be little, I couldn't let my guard down. These kids could be surprisingly crafty. So I had to take this game of tag seriously. I rolled up my sleeves, then I went running with the little ones.

"*Huff, puff*... Let's take a little break," I said. The little ones never seemed to get tired no matter how much they ran around, but the same wasn't true for me. If I didn't take the occasional breather, I couldn't go on. As I gasped for air, I sat down on a nearby lawn, only for a number of boisterous children to run after me.

"Miss Katarina, are you tired already?"

"Let's play hide-and-seek next."

Kids really have a lot of energy.

Still panting, I managed a wry chuckle in response.

"You look pretty out of breath. Are you okay?" came a voice from above. I looked up to see Cezar gazing down at me with an ever so slightly exasperated expression.

"I'll be fine, as long as I take a short break. Cezar, have you finished talking to Liam?" I replied. A smile broke across Cezar's face.

"Yeah, he had a lot of wonderful stories to tell me."

"I'm glad to hear that." Recalling how Cezar had been fighting back tears of joy only a short while ago, I really did feel glad, from the bottom of my heart.

"Waah, waah!"

Suddenly, we heard a baby crying.

"Eh? A baby?" *I know there are a lot of very young children at this orphanage, but I didn't think there were any babies.*

I looked in the direction of the crying to see an elderly woman who worked for the orphanage holding—and trying to comfort—a tiny infant. When my eyes met those of the orphanage worker, she approached us, still holding the baby.

"Hello. Thank you for playing with the children," she said, briefly bowing her head.

I asked her about the baby she was carrying. It turned out this wasn't an orphan she was caring for.

"This child's mother hasn't been doing so well since the birth," she explained. "Since she's in no condition to care for the baby, we're filling in for the time being."

When I asked for even more details, she told me that the orphanage often took care of children temporarily in this way. Whenever the family was ready to welcome the child back, they would be sent home again. Upon hearing this, I recalled that, although there were many children I saw on each one of my visits, there were always some new faces, and some children who no longer seemed to be around.

So that's why.

"What a delicate creature," said Cezar, sounding genuinely moved. I felt the same way.

Although...

"This baby really is tiny," I said, observing the baby in the caretaker's arms. Looking more closely, I really felt like I was seeing a doll.

"Tee hee, this little one is still only two months old," the lady told us with a smile.

Though the baby had been crying and fussing only moments earlier, he finally seemed to have calmed down, and was now staring at me with two big, round eyes.

"How cute," I blurted out suddenly.

The woman giggled again.

"Would you like to hold him?"

I shook my head and waved my hand furiously.

"No, no, I've never even touched such a small child before, so it would be dangerous!"

"Oh, but you know, you might be blessed with a baby of your own before long. I'll teach you how to hold him, so go ahead and try. If someone as lively as you holds him, I'm sure he'll grow up to be healthy," the worker said persuasively.

I couldn't deny that I would like to try holding such a cute baby, so I agreed, with the condition that it would only be for a moment.

"Yes, be sure to support the head firmly. That's right, well done. You've already got the hang of it."

I timidly held the baby in accordance with the worker's instructions. He was so unbelievably soft and warm, and smelled so nice. Though I struggled to put it into words, there was something irresistible about the feeling of holding him.

"He's so small. So cute. He's warm, and smells so lovely. Hey, Cezar, won't you take a look at him?" I said to Cezar, who had been standing next to me, but when I turned toward him, he had drawn away from me for some reason.

While the little children I'd been playing with crowded around me, craning their necks to look at the baby and remarking on how cute and tiny he was, Cezar alone remained unnaturally withdrawn. However, when I called out to him...

"Sure," he replied.

Still, judging from the look on his face, he must be uncomfortable. I wonder why.

"Oh, he's fallen asleep," I heard the orphanage worker say.

I looked down to see the baby breathing softly in his sleep.

"You did such a good job of holding him, you must have helped him to calm down."

"No, no, I don't think that's the case." I felt that the opposite was true. His warmth and wonderful smell had made me feel peaceful and happy.

"If we keep him here, the noise the other children are making might wake him up, so I'll take him somewhere a little more quiet," the woman said, leaning down to look at the baby, before looking around at the other kids with a smile.

I carefully handed the baby back to her. Somehow, the loss of that soft and warm feeling at my chest left me feeling a little bereft.

"See you later," the orphanage worker said, bowing briefly before taking the baby away with her.

I walked over to Cezar, who was still standing a little distance away, and spoke to him.

"Do you not like babies, Cezar?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"No, that's not it. Although..." Cezar suddenly fell silent, then looked at the little ones running around and playing tag. He seemed almost dazzled by their joy. "When I saw that baby, I felt like I could only harm something so small, pure, and beautiful by getting close to it. Sometimes, I can't help but feel that way."

I was shocked by this admission from Cezar, but I felt like there was more to his story. I stayed silent and waited for him to continue. After a prolonged silence, Cezar opened his mouth again.

"From the age of fifteen, as a mercenary, I took many lives. So my hands are still filthy, stained with their blood. And not just my hands, my entire self. That's why I mustn't get too close to anything beautiful. I'll only stain it."

His attitude had changed so dramatically, it was almost as if I were listening to a different person as Cezar suddenly blurted out these words, still staring at his own hands. His expression was one of agony. He had previously spoken about how free and easy the life of a mercenary was, but having just heard this statement, I realized that it had actually been a rough experience for him.

Now that I really thought about it, of course it was difficult for him to suddenly leave the inner palace and become a mercenary. He must have had some reason for doing it. From the short while I'd spent with Cezar, I had no doubt that he was a kind person. I couldn't imagine that he was the kind of person who would harm others willingly. The life of a mercenary must have been rough for someone as kind as him. Feared and shunned all his life because of his golden eyes, he went on to fight, even though it pained him to do so. Behind his warm smile, he might be hiding a deeply wounded heart.

Ah, perhaps Cezar's route in the game involved the protagonist taking this opportunity to get closer to him, and soothing his broken heart. That might be how they were supposed to fall in love. When this thought occurred to me, I wondered if I should introduce Cezar to Maria. I was, of course, terrified of my own doom, but I couldn't just abandon Cezar when he was suffering so badly. *All right, after this, let's figure out how to introduce Cezar to Maria.*

A villainess like me could hardly be expected to soothe his soul, the way the protagonist would, so I would have to ask Maria for help. All I could do for now was tell Cezar how I felt. Having made up my mind, I took Cezar's hand and squeezed it. He looked startled.

"Cezar," I said, "when I thought I was about to fall, you caught me with these very hands. They're such warm and gentle hands, and they don't look filthy to me at all. I'm sure that Janne, your brother, and everyone else who treasures you feels the same way. So I hope you won't go on calling yourself filthy."

Cezar was silent as he stared back at me, his eyes wide open, so I went on.

"If any of those people who hold you so dear heard you denigrate yourself in that way, I think they'd feel sad."

Having said that, I squeezed his hand tightly again.

"Your hands are warm and gentle. And you are as well, Cezar."

Realizing I was doing all the talking, and worried I might have upset him unintentionally, I looked up at his face to see he was still looking shocked. *But he doesn't look angry*. Then, before my eyes, his expression gradually faded to be replaced by a gentle smile.

"Thanks."

Good, so I didn't offend him. Feeling relieved, I started to release Cezar's hand, only to have him grab my hand in response. Then, for some reason, he started to lift my hand toward his lips. *Huh? What's going on?*

"Lady Katarina," I suddenly heard a familiar voice address me from somewhere next to me.

"Huh? Maria?"

I'd turned to see that, for some reason, my friend Maria was standing there.

Maria was always so sweet and charming. But, though I couldn't imagine why, she had a much sharper look in her eyes than normal.

"What do you think you're doing?" Again, she did not speak in her usual peaceful tone. Her voice had a much harsher ring to it.

What am I doing? Well, I'm not so sure myself.

Only moments earlier, I'd been telling Cezar how I felt about him, and squeezing his hand, but now, conversely, he had taken my hand. I was on the verge of asking the same question myself. What exactly was going on?

As I was too puzzled to say anything, Cezar spoke up on my behalf.

"We were just having a little chat," he said, swiftly letting go of my hand and turning to look at Maria. He plastered on the same smile I'd seen him use when confronted by royals and nobles.

"Might you be the famous Light Magic user, Maria Campbell?"

"I really don't know whether or not I'm famous, but I am indeed Maria Campbell. Would you happen to be Prince Cezar Dahl of Ethenell, or am I mistaken?"

"Yeah, that's right."

Wow, it looks like they've both heard of each other. But although they'd heard of one another, they hadn't been previously acquainted. This was their first meeting. A heartthrob and a beauty looking into each other's eyes was truly a sight for sore eyes. It could have easily been a still image marking an event in the game. *This is how they meet, before eventually falling in love...*

"So, Prince Cezar Dahl, perhaps you might tell me why you are here all alone with Lady Katarina?"

"I asked her to be my guide around town here in the capital, just for today. She happened to bring me here on our tour. And you can just call me Cezar."

"Very well. If you insist, Prince Cezar. There are people whose job is to guide tourists around the towns of Sorcié. I think you would be better served if you employed one of them. Perhaps you can do so in future."

"Considering my position, I really can't employ anyone I don't fully trust. Besides, as you can see, I'm traveling informally today, so not just anyone will do."

"Is that so? But I was under the impression that you and Lady Katarina had only just met."

"Actually, I met her during the Assembly, and we happened to get along."

They both carried on this conversation with a smile, but for some reason, I couldn't detect any warmth whatsoever between them. On the contrary, though it could have been my imagination, I thought I felt a chill between them.

As the protagonist, Maria had to consider all the other romanceable characters, and couldn't be so easily won over. But even if she was like an impregnable fortress, and didn't easily display warmth, shouldn't Cezar still be interested in her, and start to show hints of attraction to her?

Is he attracted to her? I really don't see any sign of it... No, no matter how I look at this, he doesn't seem interested in her at all. Also, I felt like Maria was conducting herself in a colder manner than usual.

While these thoughts raced through my head, their conversation continued. From what I overheard, Maria had been in the area while working outside the office, and took the opportunity to deliver some vegetables to the orphanage on Cyrus's behalf. This explained why Maria was here in the first place.

She did not seem too happy to see me and Cezar out on the town together. Apparently, it was dangerous for me to walk around with a foreign royal without any servants attending us. I had to admit, she was right. Cezar said something like, "That won't be a problem. Don't worry." Still, I decided that in future, I'd be more careful.

But is this really *the glorious meeting that was supposed to lead to the two of them falling in love? Up until a moment ago, I'd thought it would be good for Cezar if the two of them got to know each other, but is it just me, or do they not seem to be getting along* at all?

I was starting to feel very concerned, but it didn't seem like I'd be able to interject, and the conversation continued a while longer.

"Ah, it's about time for me to be heading back," Cezar eventually remarked.

"Oh, indeed? Well then, please take care on your way back home," said Maria. With that, their first interaction was at an end.

What gives? Just watching them talk made my stomach flutter and my heart pound. I feel really worn out.

“Well, looks like you’ll be heading home too, Katarina,” Cezar said to me. Since we’d come together, if Cezar was going back to the palace, it only made sense for me to go home as well.

“I suppose I will,” I replied.

“Excuse me,” Maria said, “but you will be returning to the palace, will you not, Prince Cezar? If that is the case, as I shall be returning to the Magical Ministry myself, I believe coming with me would prove more convenient. Would you like to accompany me?”

She was right in saying that would be convenient for Cezar if she took him back, and I’d be able to head straight home as well.

Cezar looked at me, then at Maria.

“I guess it would,” he said with his princely smile. “Well, if you insist, I’ll head back in Miss Maria’s carriage.”

Thus, Cezar and I parted ways at the orphanage, and I headed home by myself. After boarding my carriage, and once I was done waving to the children who ran to see me off, I immediately dozed off and slept like a log. I guess I somehow really tired myself out.

★★★★★★

I, Cezar Dahl, found myself sitting in a clattering carriage with a woman I had only just met for the first time—Maria Campbell. Despite being a commoner, she was a Light Magic user. News of this anomalous individual had already reached as far as the royal palace of Ethenell. Because I had previously laid eyes on her at the Assembly, she was not entirely unfamiliar to me, although we were meeting for the first time.

In the course of my work, I had ridden in carriages with people I had only just met before. That in and of itself was not remarkable. But after seeing the sharp look in this beauty’s eyes, I was unable to feel at ease. Her gaze, which had been dripping with hostility from the moment she’d first spoken to me, had only grown more fierce since we boarded the carriage together. I might have felt lucky to spend this time alone with such a breathtaking beauty, but I did not find my situation to be enjoyable in the slightest. Though I knew perfectly well the reason for her hostility, I thought I would still attempt to break the ice.

“You needn’t act so openly hostile toward me. I have no intention of doing anything untoward to your dear friend."

Maria looked startled by my words, then she covered her face with her hands.

"I beg your pardon... I wasn't even aware that I was acting that way." Her voice sounded anxious.

I was pretty shocked myself, to learn that she had displayed such open hostility unconsciously.

Come now, just how precious is Katarina to this girl? I was already aware that Maria Campbell and Katarina were close, but having seen how hostile she became immediately after we met (though I suppose she did come across a compromising scene), I could hardly believe that her reaction was unintentional.

After burying her face in her hands regretfully for a while, she suddenly raised her head again and turned to me with a look of determination.

"Excuse me, Prince Cezar, but I was told you had come to Sorcié to find yourself a bride. Is that true?"

Though I was aware that people had been saying that, I was still startled to discover that she knew about it.

"Where did you hear that?" I asked somewhat sternly.

She answered smoothly and frankly.

"One of my superiors at the Magical Ministry told me what I ought to do if you spoke to me. I was also instructed not to tell anyone else, and I haven't."

It sounded to me like, having heard about me from somewhere else, someone important had worried that I might approach Maria with an offer of marriage, and had taken steps to prepare her. Not only did she possess Light Magic, a rare ability, but she was also so pretty that some men would probably fall in love with her at first sight. Though I did get the impression that she was perhaps honest to a fault, she did not seem stupid. In fact, I'd heard that she was always near the top of her class at the academy.

That was the kind of woman I was dealing with. Even though she was a commoner, it would not be so strange for foreign royals to seek her hand in marriage, despite her lowly status. That must have been what Maria's superior had been thinking when they had informed her of this rumor. In fact, if I hadn't already met *her*, there might have been some chance of me being attracted to Maria Campbell.

But that was merely a hypothetical scenario. As I was now, no such feelings for Maria were awakened in my heart. And I suspected that the same was true for her. She was probably wary of me. And from what I'd just heard, I felt I understood why.

The reason for that wariness is...

"I was told that, if you met a woman whose hand you desired, and if she gave her consent, you would be permitted to take her back to Ethenell as your fiancée. However, Lady Katarina is already engaged to a prince of this kingdom. I cannot imagine that you will be able to marry her," said Maria, looking me squarely in the eye.

There was such a powerful look of defiance in her eyes, I almost felt like she was challenging me. It was just as I'd expected. Maria was wary of me because she thought I wanted to seduce Katarina and take her back to Ethenell as my fiancée.

Well, I can see how she got that from the scene she walked in on. If she'd already heard that I was looking for a bride, I can understand how she'd think that. I really *don't want to make an enemy of her.*

I plastered a peaceful smile on my face and spoke firmly.

"Don't be ridiculous. Of course I wouldn't even think of making a pass at the thirdborn prince's fiancée." I said this to her as if it were obvious.

Maria blinked in surprise.

"Is that really true?" she asked, apparently still slightly suspicious of me.

"Yeah, of course," I declared with a smile.

She must have been an honest and trusting girl at heart. Once I'd declared firmly that I had no untoward intentions, she let her guard down. Though in my own mind, I added, *At least, not yet.* She didn't seem aware of that.

Now that her guard was down, she had a much gentler look in her eyes. When I asked her about Katarina, she seemed delighted, and answered me with a smile. It seemed that this woman, Maria Campbell, really could not help but love Katarina from the bottom of her heart. I suspected that, if I made an enemy of her, she would be just as vexing an enemy as Prince Jeord.

Though I wore a smile as I heard her talk about Katarina, internally, I noticed that I was breaking out in a cold sweat. After I listened to Maria talk about her darling Katarina for a while, she dropped me off at the palace, and I was finally able to let out a sigh of relief.

When I returned to the quarters that had been allocated to me, I found Janne waiting there for me.

"How did it go?" he asked with a grin. This was after he'd claimed to have urgent business and skipped out on me, intentionally leaving me to spend the day alone with Katarina.

My first reaction was, *Who asked you to do that?* But after spending the day with Katarina, and thoroughly enjoying my time with her, I started to feel like I should thank him for giving me that opportunity. However, given our relationship, and my personality, I felt too embarrassed to honestly say something like "Thanks to you, I had a great time." Instead...

"It was all right."

I then quickly headed toward my private bedroom. Though I could still faintly hear Janne chuckling behind me, I decided to pretend that I hadn't. After entering my room, I immediately fell back onto my bed.

When I started to relax, I naturally started thinking about Katarina. Ever since we met at the Assembly, when she had shown no fear of my abnormal golden eyes, I'd been interested in her. However, when I learned that she was already engaged to a prince of this kingdom, I managed to repress those feelings and prevent them from developing further.

But...

"Your hands are warm and gentle. And you are as well, Cezar."

I remembered how kind Katarina's voice was, and how warm her hands were. Her kind words worked their way into my heart, which had been so full of turmoil that I had long felt like screaming, and started to soothe it.

Ah, am I really such a simple man?

Back when I had been a mercenary, I'd enjoyed the same pleasures as other mercenaries, and had my share of dalliances with working girls. Despite that, when I thought about Katarina, I felt my cheeks start to burn like those of an adolescent boy. I'd never felt that way before. Though any attempt to become involved with her would only spell trouble for me, I could no longer deny the truth: I had fallen for this woman, Katarina Claes.

Unable to suppress these feelings by reason alone any longer, I sighed heavily. After all, she was already engaged to a prince of this kingdom, and he was smitten with her. On top of that, she was surrounded by many others who were just as smitten with her, including the Light Magic user, Maria Campbell. Katarina wasn't someone I could become involved with just like that. Still, now that these feelings had awakened in me, the thought of my acquaintance with Katarina ending at the close of this study trip filled me with sadness. I didn't want to be unable to see her again.

I have to maintain at least some kind of connection with her, and if I could grant just one wish... But in order for that to even be possible, I guess I need to ingratiate myself to Sorcié.

From the very start, I had already intended to do just that, for the sake of my country. But now that my personal feelings were involved, I was even more motivated. Following my investigation of the incident at that harbor town, and the conversation I'd had with Liam—a boy born in Ethenell—that day, I decided to look into a matter that had been bothering me. I felt like, if I did, it might yield information that could allow me to curry substantial favor with Sorcié.

I cast aside the fog that had entered my mind along with these unprecedented feelings, and switched gears to prepare myself for work.

Chapter 4: Maria's Crisis

After parting ways with Maria and Cezar, I returned to Claes Manor alone in my carriage. Upon my arrival, I immediately went to my room and collapsed on my bed. Even though I'd slept like a log in my carriage, it apparently wasn't enough to relieve my exhaustion.

Well, the past two days have been pretty jam-packed. Perhaps I've accumulated some tiredness.

As I lay there, a thought suddenly occurred to me.

I wonder how Maria and Cezar got along, spending their own carriage journey alone together.

Though Maria was very popular with guys, she didn't seem very interested in romance. Whenever I asked her if there was anyone she liked or was at least interested in, she always said, "I love you, Lady Katarina." She was a girl who was very forceful with her feelings of friendship. That was why the first game's story had concluded in a Friendship End, and at present it still didn't look like Maria was making much progress with Dewey or Cyrus, despite the affection they had for her.

So I had the faint hope that, when all was said and done, this game's story might also lead to a Friendship End. In the case of a Friendship End, the game's villainess—Katarina—would not face doom, so I could rest assured of my safety.

But if Maria and Cezar's relationship started to develop, then Katarina the villainess would have to make an appearance. In my time at the Academy of Magic, I had already learned that events from the story could occur even if I did nothing, maybe as a result of the game's coercive power. If, by some chance, I unintentionally got in the way of their romance, then what might they do to me? I imagined the worst for a moment, but then decided there was no way—no way two people like them would do me any harm if all I did was get in the way of their romance.

The game's setting had found many ways to mess with me, so I'd developed a tendency to overthink things. In this case, though, I really knew Maria and Cezar, and could say with confidence that there was no chance of them doing something so extreme. The same was true of Dewey, Cyrus, and Sora. I knew they weren't the kind of people to do something like that.

But, with the existence of Dark Magic, and people who sought to expand its influence, I had to accept there were unknown enemies who might not follow the same rules. These people were heartless, and regarded even the lives of others as mere trifles. These evil-doers might use Dark Magic against the romanceable characters, or threaten to harm those closest to them and Maria.

In those circumstances, I couldn't say for certain what my strong and kindhearted friends might do. So I had to keep a close eye on everyone.

When I recalled my past life at eight years old and realized I was in an otome game—and that I was its villainess, for whom all routes led to doom—I thought of nothing but how to avoid a Bad End. But now that I had so many dear friends, I no longer thought only of protecting myself, but them as well.

I had started to consider that *Fortune Lover II* might have a Bad End centered on a hidden character—like the one that existed in the first game, which saw the lives of every character, romanceable or otherwise, cut short—back when I'd first recognized that there was a new hidden character. Just the thought of starting down a route that led to that sort of ending made a chill run down my spine.

For that reason, there was a lot I needed to learn and consider. I took out a certain note I had found written in Japanese—which I had guarded very closely—and unfolded it. This note, whose author was still unknown, concerned a romanceable character and the villainess, Katarina, who gets in the way of that romance.

I wonder how the Katarina of this game obtained her powers of Dark Magic in the first place.

Meeting chairwoman: Katarina Claes.

Meeting representative: Katarina Claes.

Meeting secretary: Katarina Claes.

"Greetings, everyone. The topic of today's meeting will be, 'How did the Katarina in the game obtain Dark Magic?' How do you suppose she did it?"

"How? Didn't she find or buy that mirror-looking thing, just like we did?"

“Hmm, but would possessing that mirror-looking thing be enough to activate her Dark Magic by itself? Our Katarina couldn’t do anything until after getting Pochi.”

“That’s true. Our Dark Magic was first activated when we had Pochi with us. Although, we did see Katarina with a black creature that could have been Pochi on one of the game screens in our dreams, and she was holding something a bit like the Dark Covenant. Couldn’t that mean Katarina in the game also obtained Dark Magic after meeting Pochi?”

“But wouldn’t that imply the game’s Katarina also went to rescue Keith, and met Pochi there? I thought they didn’t get along in the games.”

“Yeah, she wouldn’t have gone there at that time. In the first place, Katarina ends up getting exiled from the kingdom in the first game, and wouldn’t have known about what happened to Keith, so she probably found Pochi while wandering around that area at some other time.”

“How do you meet a Dark Familiar by just wandering around? I can’t imagine a situation like that taking place.”

“Then maybe someone in the area approached her, and simply said, ‘You there, how would you like to become a Dark Magic user?’”

“No way would anyone... Well, *some* people might.”

“Huh?”

“Umm, I only said that as a joke... Do you think that could really happen?”

“Yes. If I remember right, I heard that Keith’s kidnapper—his older brother—was approached in that very way.”

“Ah, now that you mention it, that’s right. Didn’t he say he was approached when he’d been run out of home and was at his wit’s end?”

“Correct. His circumstances were precisely those that Katarina would have found herself in after being exiled from the country. It wouldn’t have been difficult to get close to the exiled Katarina by tempting her with the possibility of obtaining Dark Magic, given how pitiful her regular magic is.”

“And then you end up with Katarina, Wielder of Darkness.”

“Precisely.”

“If we look at it that way, then the Katarina of the game is really a creation of the organization Sarah’s part of. I wonder if they were also the ones who ordered Katarina to harass Maria and the romanceable characters."

"I don't know about that. It's possible that Katarina did that out of her own feelings of misplaced resentment—her grudge over being exiled from the country, for instance."

"That is plausible. But if that's the case, then rather than being directly ordered to harass the other characters, it seems more like she was manipulated. If we consider this possibility, then we must conclude that the organization also wanted to harm Maria and the romanceable characters."

"Harm Maria and the romanceable characters...? But none of them have anything to do with Dark Magic, right?"

"Not so. Maria is a Wielder of Light. Light Magic has the power to resist Dark Magic. I believe that anyone who possesses such strong Light Magic would pose a threat to their plans to spread Dark Magic."

"They certainly would..."

"Then we're not the only ones at risk. We'll have to look out for Maria too."

"True. We had better do that from now on."

I suddenly gripped the edges of the note tightly. The more I thought about it, the more dangerous my present situation seemed. Not only did I have to protect myself, but I had to look out for Maria and everyone around her. That would certainly not be easy.

In particular, I wonder if a villainess like me—someone who was supposed to be their enemy and get defeated in the end—can really help them... An indescribable feeling of helplessness and anxiety spread inside my chest.

I closed my eyes and heard the words, *Don't worry. You can do this.* For some reason, a really old memory had surfaced in my mind. I sighed. *Why am I remembering* that *face and* those *words right now? I bet it's because I dreamed about* him *yesterday.*

By "him," I meant the younger of the two older brothers I had in my previous life. Because we were closer in age, we often played together, often fought and bickered, but in the end he was always a reliable older brother. Though he might complain about it, he always rescued me.

I'd forgotten the details, there was a time in my past life when I was frustrated by being unable to do something, no matter how hard I tried, and started to cry. My brother tried his hardest to encourage me.

“Don’t worry. You can do this. You’re my little sister, after all.”

I think he finished by firmly calling me by my name—the name I had in that life—and slapping me on the shoulder. That hurt a bit, didn’t it?

When I remembered this, for some reason I couldn’t help but chuckle to myself. In this life, I was surrounded by many people who were dear to me, and had some very dependable friends, but I still thought that there had been something special about that older brother of mine.

Okay. After remembering what my big brother told me, suddenly I feel like I can do this. The duration of the game’s story is fixed. I just need to survive six more months—no, actually a bit less, since some time has already passed. If I can make it to the end of that period, I’m sure that an even more wonderful life will be waiting for me!

I clenched my fists tightly. I was going to be all right. I could do this.

When I woke up the next morning, it wasn’t long before Keith came to my room. Apparently I’d fallen fast asleep soon after coming home the previous night, so he’d been waiting for me to wake up.

“So, big sister. What happened yesterday?” asked Keith with a look of distinct displeasure.

I told him about how we had enjoyed going to the bookstore and the eatery, before visiting a farm and the orphanage for the sake of Cezar’s studies. I told him that it had been a very fulfilling day.

After hearing my account, Keith still had the same angry look in his eyes.

“So the Prince of Ethenell didn’t say anything, or do anything to you?” he asked me.

I wonder what’s making him so tense. Maybe he’s worried that I was rude while serving as Cezar’s guide. Yeah, that’s got *to be it.*

“Prince Cezar said that Sorcié is a wonderful country. He was very pleased, and said he would take note of everything I showed him. I swear I didn’t do anything rude as his guide,” I answered with my head held high.

Keith then furrowed his brow in exasperation.

"No, that wasn't what I was worried about. But from what you've said, it at least sounds like you're all right."

"Eh? That wasn't it? Then what *were* you worried about?"

"I feel like if I tell you, it'll be the only thing on your mind, and that can only make things worse..."

"Huh?"

"No, forget about it. I'm glad that the Prince of Ethenell was satisfied with your services as a tour guide. But if you were ever rude to a foreign royal, you could find yourself in a lot of trouble, so it would be better if you didn't deal with any from now on. And if you have no choice but to deal with them, make sure you tell me first."

"You're right. There would indeed be trouble if I ever offended a foreign royal. All right. If this happens again, I'll be sure to report it to you, Keith."

As there was still the matter of the otome game's story, I wasn't really thinking of continuing my acquaintance with Cezar anyway. But after seeing how sad he'd looked when we'd met that baby the previous day, I was concerned about him. If we did run into each other again, it would be all right as long as I discussed it with Keith.

After my chat with Keith, I headed to my job at the Magical Ministry, as usual, and passed the day there the same way I always did. When it came to my Dark Magic training, I applied myself to it more seriously than before, thinking that it might come in useful in what could be an imminent crisis. However, I didn't see any dramatic improvement. The results were the same as always.

In the afternoon, I psyched myself up more than usual as I got to work deciphering my covenant. I also took the opportunity to ask Maria what happened after I parted ways with her and Cezar the previous day.

"I very much enjoyed talking to him about you, Lady Katarina," she replied. Not the kind of answer I was expecting.

Well, I guess they just used their mutual acquaintance as a jumping-off point for their conversation, I thought. When I asked for more details, I was informed this wasn't the case: They'd really talked about me more or less the entire time. *You're supposed to talk about each other... If your only topic of conversation is a villainess, your relationship will never develop, that's for sure.*

From the look of things, I was convinced that Maria had not been all that captivated by Cezar.

Nor did I get very far in deciphering my covenant. Despite my attempts to motivate myself, I didn't make any more progress than usual. Consequently, I had proven that, even if I tried to psych myself up, things wouldn't change all that much.

When the workday was over, I said goodbye to Maria—who worked in a different department—and returned to my own department's office to prepare to go home for the day. On my way there, I was surprised to recognize someone whose face I'd seen just the previous day walking in the opposite direction.

"Prince Cezar!" I cried without thinking.

Cezar, looking just as surprised.

"Katarina!"

When I came closer, I saw that Janne was here too. Our eyes met, and he greeted me with a brief smile. For a moment, I wondered what he was doing at the Ministry, then I remembered that he was making a point of visiting every workplace that would admit him as part of his studies.

"Prince Cezar, are you visiting the Magical Ministry for work today?" I inquired.

Cezar nodded.

"Yeah, now that I have permission, I thought I'd come take a look."

It was just as I'd thought.

"I see, but please, don't push yourself too hard and wear yourself out."

"You too? That's just the kind of thing Janne would say."

"Well, anyone who heard how many appointments you've been packing in would get worried."

"I don't think I've been doing all that much."

So the man himself isn't really aware that he's overdoing it. Hmm, I guess people who work too hard are aware of it less often than you'd think.

"From what I've heard, it is that much. You should listen to Janne and take proper breaks," I said matter-of-factly.

"I'll think about it," replied Cezar.

I guess that's a forward-thinking answer.

Since we'd finished talking about his workaholism, I asked about something else that had been bothering me.

"By the way, Prince Cezar, did you get along well with Maria yesterday? It was your first time meeting each other, so I was just wondering if it went okay."

It sounded like Maria had been entirely unmoved by their meeting, but it was possible the other party felt quite differently.

Particularly for Cezar, a romanceable character, it seemed possible that he was actually quite enamored of Maria, even if she didn't realize it.

"Yeah, though it was our first time meeting, we seemed to know a fair bit about each other, and we had an enjoyable conversation as we both headed home," Cezar replied smoothly.

Nope, he seems really casual about it too. Looks like there really wasn't any progress between them.

In the game, this would have been a special encounter event between the protagonist and one of the romanceable characters. Could it really be so uneventful?

Since I'd heard about their carriage ride from Maria, I already knew the answer to my next question, but I inquired anyway.

"What did you two talk about?"

"We talked about you the whole time."

Cezar gave me exactly the same answer that Maria had. And once again, I was dismayed to hear that they'd only talked about me, their mutual acquaintance.

"Our short time together was enough for me to see just how fond of you that young lady is," said Cezar with a grin.

Maria, what on earth did you say about me?!

I already knew she was very fond of me, but now I knew she felt so strongly that it was obvious to other people, I couldn't help but feel a bit bashful.

"She had the most joyful expression as she told me how, from the moment you met at the academy, you've always been a great help to her," Cezar continued.

"No, no," I immediately responded, "I was the one who always needed help. Ever since we were at the academy together, and even now that we're working at the Ministry together, I've always been the one getting help from Maria." Maria had helped me with my studies a lot back at the academy, and she had continued to help me a lot since we both entered employment at the Magical Ministry.

I've definitely needed more help from her than she has from me—an awful lot more! I couldn't help but speak passionately about that fact. The next thing I knew, Cezar was staring at me, clearly at a loss for words. *Whoops, looks like I got a bit too fired up*, I thought, belatedly.

But Cezar just chuckled.

"I can see now that you and Maria Campbell are both very fond of one another. What a wonderful relationship you have."

"Really? If so, I'm glad," I replied, feeling bashful again and scratching my head.

When I was eight and I regained my memories of my past life, I had realized that—in the world of this otome game—my role was that of the villainess, who was supposed to get in the protagonist's way, leading to my own doom. At that time, I thought of Maria as a potential enemy.

But once I entered the academy, and learned more about her true character, I understood very well why the romanceable characters would all end up being drawn to her. As the protagonist, Maria was not just a pretty face. She was kind, and also possessed great strength. She was truly a remarkable woman. So these days I was immensely pleased that I hadn't been defeated by the fate that came with my role in the game, and had instead managed to become friends with Maria.

As I was ruminating on these thoughts, Cezar muttered something under his breath, like maybe "Humph. I guess I really have a lot of rivals," but his voice was a little quiet, so I didn't quite catch everything he said.

Oh? Does that mean Cezar actually likes Maria?

"Excuse me, Cezar, but are you..." I began, thinking of asking whether he was attracted to Maria, but something in the air told me that, if I asked him so directly, I couldn't expect an answer. So instead I tried to sugarcoat it a little. "Cezar, could it be that you have someone special on your mind?"

"Do I? Who can say?" said Cezar suggestively, a big grin on his face. Something about his expression and tone had a very grown-up sex appeal. While I was still reeling from that, he spoke again. "Now, I bet your carriage will be here any minute. Bye for now." Then, after patting me on the head, he encouraged me to go home.

"Ah! Yes, bye then."

Swept up in the moment, I did as I was told, saying goodbye and walking away. After just a few steps, I looked back, but Cezar—walking briskly—was already far away. As I watched him stride away, I thought to myself, *I guess the romanceable characters really* are *super sexy*.

After that, I went back to the office, gathered my things and headed to the gates, where my carriage was already waiting for me. Sora was working outside the office again that day. Since he wasn't around, I trotted to my carriage by myself. On my way, I spotted someone who I'd just parted ways with.

"Why, Janne, didn't you just go back to the palace? And where's Prince Cezar?"

I found Cezar's servant, Janne, standing there all by himself.

"Prince Cezar said there was another place he wanted to observe, and went there. I waited here in the hopes of expressing my thanks to you, Lady Claes," said Janne, before bowing his head respectfully.

"Thank me?"

What on earth did I do to deserve thanks?

"Indeed. I would like to sincerely thank you for being Prince Cezar's guide yesterday. He seemed delighted when he returned, and it was all thanks to you, Lady Claes."

Ah, so he just wanted to thank me for being Cezar's guide.

"No, no, I had fun as well, so there's no need to thank me. Though I'm very glad to hear that Prince Cezar seemed to enjoy himself."

"Indeed. Though the man himself would surely deny it if I said so in front of him, I could see his joy and contentment oozing from every pore on his body," said Janne with a snicker.

"He was that happy? I feel honored." I never would have imagined that he enjoyed our time together so much. But I felt like I could believe whatever Janne said.

At that moment, I suddenly recalled something Cezar had uttered the previous day with a pained expression. Usually, I would hesitate to ask questions about someone who wasn't present, but I had the sneaking suspicion that Cezar was shouldering this burden all by himself. Considering how close these two were, I felt like it would be okay to talk about this with Janne. That's what I thought.

So I told Janne what Cezar had said the previous day when presented with a baby at the orphanage: that he felt like not only his hands, but his entire being was stained with blood, so he shouldn't touch anything so pure. I told him how Cezar's expression had been like that of a different person as he said it, and that it looked like he was suffering.

"So, you see, I started to worry about Prince Cezar," I said as I finished recounting this event.

Janne furrowed his brow, and was silent. After a spell, he looked at me with a serious expression and opened his mouth.

"Lady Claes, could I briefly share a story from my past with you?"

I nodded firmly.

"As long as I've known him, Prince Cezar has always been earnest and kindhearted. When others hurt him, he would always grin and bear it; it clearly always pained him to do anything that hurt others," Janne began, before launching into a tale from Cezar's days as a young boy.

Cezar was very fond of his brother, the king, and was always saying, "When I grow up, I want to be useful to my elder brother." However, after learning about academics and manners, and leaving the manor owned by his brother, who always protected him, he encountered many people who spoke ill of the fact that his brother had ever taken him in. Even the faction that supported his brother, who should have been Cezar's allies as well, complained that he would only drag the king down.

Earnest as he was, Cezar took all of this to heart, and started to distance himself from his beloved brother for his brother's own sake. Once he reached adulthood, he decided it would be better for the king in the coming years if he wasn't around. He left the kingdom, becoming a mercenary who vowed to bury anyone who opposed the king.

Cezar, who had been such a kind boy that he hesitated even to kill bugs, was plainly wounded deeply by working as a mercenary. But he never acknowledged this fact, always repeating the words, "I'm fine. No need to worry," as Janne saw his expression grow darker day by day. Janne said that Cezar eventually even started to convince himself that there was nothing to worry about.

"I like this kind of work. The free life of a mercenary suits my disposition. Roughhousing suits me. I think nothing of hurting people, even killing them," he used to repeat to himself. Over the long months and years, he kept telling himself that, until he became that kind of person, convinced that he had been that man from the beginning. However, he was not able to change his true nature entirely, and from time to time, Janne could still see a look of suffering on his face. Janne said this had been a source of pain and sorrow for him as well.

After hearing this terribly heavy and painful story, I recalled Cezar's words from the previous day again.

"*My hands are still filthy, stained with their blood. And not just my hands, my entire self. That's why I mustn't get too close to anything beautiful. I'll only stain it.*"

He had said this with a pained expression that made him look almost like a different person, as he stared at his own hands.

So those were the experiences that were behind his reaction.

"You see, Janne, I never imagined that he had experienced such things, and now I'm worried that I might have said something insensitive," I confessed to Janne as I chided myself for my conduct the previous day. I was worried that I had spoken out of turn, given I still didn't know Cezar very well; I might have made him feel even worse.

"Insensitive? What did you say?"

"Well, I said they seemed like gentle hands to me, that you and the king must feel the same way, and that you would both be very sad if you knew he thought so harshly about himself. I might have upset Prince Cezar."

Cezar had been desperate to repress his own feelings. If I had been the protagonist, the one who was originally supposed to soothe Cezar's heart, I might have been able to choose my words better. But I simply expressed what I believed strongly to be the case; everything I said seemed obvious to me. But I said it without knowing about the deep history behind Cezar's suffering.

At the time, Cezar had smiled, showing no indication of being angry with me, but having just heard what Janne had to say, now I thought that he might have been humoring me. I bowed my head as I reflected internally on my error, but I noticed Janne wasn't saying anything in response. I suddenly raised my head to see him grinning broadly.

Eh? What's going on?

"Prince Cezar was most certainly *not* upset. In fact, he seemed delighted by what you said, Lady Claes."

"Is that so...?" I responded with a blank expression, doubt still gnawing at my heart.

Janne's expression turned serious again.

"Yes. I, Janne, who have been by Prince Cezar's side since he was six, can say this without a doubt in my mind."

Since he spoke with such conviction, I decided to believe him.

With that, Janne must have decided it was time we concluded our conversation.

"I beg your pardon for detaining you, just as you were about to make your way home." Then he bowed his head.

"Ah, no, on the contrary," I said, but Janne only bowed even more deeply.

"I hope I can entrust you with Prince Cezar's care in the future," he said.

"Eh? Ah, of course..."

This didn't seem like a situation where it would be appropriate to say, "No, I'm nothing but a villainess," "There are doom flags on the horizon, so I must refrain from getting more deeply involved," or even "Why me?" Instead, I gave an affirmative answer.

Janne smiled, seeming satisfied, then left to join Cezar.

I felt like there were a lot of things I was going to have to think about, but also felt like there was no need to hurry. For now, I decided, I would board my carriage and sleep all the way home.

★★★★★★

After finishing my work for the day—my visit to the Magical Ministry—I, Cezar Dahl, returned to the quarters that had been assigned to me at the palace.

Janne, who had briefly left my side at the Ministry, claiming he had other business, was there waiting for me.

"Well done, Cezar," he said, speaking plainly and even patting me on the head.

He had such a cheerful grin on his face that I couldn't recall ever seeing him like that before. When I asked what had happened, of all things, he said that he'd just come back after talking to Katarina. He didn't tell me what they'd spoken about in detail, but it seemed like he'd heard about some of the previous day's events.

Janne, having noted my mood upon returning yesterday, clearly suspected that something had taken place between me and Katarina, and having heard her account, apparently thought it was something joyous.

Though it had been something joyous, just as he surmised, I didn't see why *he* was so happy about it, to the point where I started to feel embarrassed. Though I couldn't put my finger on why, I felt like making myself scarce. It was with those feelings of awkwardness in full swing that I returned to my private room.

But then a report from one of my subordinates snapped me out of that. The report related to an event that had happened some time ago: the incident where criminals attempted to sell children they'd abducted to Lousabre, via Ethenell. At first, this incident had been deemed the result of a conspiracy between some petty villains from Ethenell and some idiots from Lousabre. However, after continuing with my own independent investigation, I had started to suspect that someone from Sorcié of very high status was also involved.

Once these suspicions arose, I had made full use of the connections I had built in my days as a mercenary, and managed to gather a lot of detailed information from the underworld. In the course of doing so, I had been told that a noble from Sorcié was involved in these kidnappings.

I had realized then that this fact could prove very damaging to the upper echelon of the kingdom's society. If I, the Prince of Ethenell, could expose this crime and present evidence as to its perpetrator, it could win me a great deal of favor with Sorcié. To that end, ever since coming here to study, I'd continued my investigation behind the scenes, but I hadn't found any promising leads.

The wheels really started to turn again when I had asked the boy I met at the orphanage what the man he saw when he was brought to Sorcié looked like. The incident report I'd received from Sorcié had claimed that the man was "just a lowly goon," but now I realized that I knew him. He was someone with whom I'd become somewhat acquainted in my time as a mercenary.

And I knew that he was *not* just some lowly goon. He was known for being shrewd and highly skilled, and for nearly always succeeding in the work he was given. I couldn't believe that someone like him would have been working as a mere minion for morons. Using my connections from my mercenary days, as well as all the money I had, I searched for him.

Then, while I continued my work in Sorcié, visiting workplace after workplace, I awaited news of his whereabouts. And that very report had just arrived.

"I'll be going out for a little while, late at night," I said to Janne.

Janne understood exactly what this implied.

“Right, then I’ll make sure I’m ready too.”

This was an exchange we had often shared during my mercenary days.

“Yeah. I’m counting on you,” I said, then decided to take a short nap.

After entering my bedroom, I lay down on the couch and closed my eyes, only to see the face of the woman I’d just spoken with earlier that day.

“Cezar, could it be that you have someone special on your mind?”

She had asked this with the most innocent look on her face. If it had been calculated, she was one hell of an actress, but I was sure that wasn’t the case.

Jeez, looks like the girl I’ve fallen for is nothing but trouble, I thought to myself, even as a feeling of warmth spread within my chest, and I fell into a pleasant sleep.

In the dead of night, under cover of darkness, Janne and I slipped out of the castle and into town, just as we had planned. Taking care not to be noticed, we eventually came to a dimly lit tavern in a far corner of the town. Though the tavern wasn’t particularly large, we found there were still a few empty seats—perhaps the tavern was just too far out of most people’s way to get a lot of patrons. It seemed to be a place where regular customers came to drink their liquor in peace and quiet. No one was making a fuss. They all drank silently.

In one corner—in a spot I suspected was near the back door—I found a man sitting alone, nursing his drink. The man, plain-looking and of medium height and build, typically didn’t stick in anyone’s memory. I guess this was partly because he conducted himself in such a way as to avoid standing out. That boy I’d met in the orphanage, who had managed to remember him, must have keen powers of observation. *He might be a major player in years to come.*

I casually walked up to the man.

“Mind if I sit next to you?”

After looking carefully at my face, the man’s eyes widened slightly for a moment, but then he nodded slightly.

“I know you... You’re doing pretty well for a former mercenary. Though I guess it’s more remarkable that you ever chose that path in the first place, given your standing,” muttered the man softly, furrowing his brow at first, but following this with a wry chuckle.

Looks like neither of us needs any introduction.

"I'm honored to hear that you remember me," I stated with a smile.

The man returned this with a frown that was deeper than before.

"So, what does a prince want with the likes of me?" he said, implicitly insisting that I get straight to the point.

Without delay, I obliged him. As he listened to what I had to say, the wrinkles in the man's brow became steadily deeper, and when I was finished, he let out a long sigh.

"Guess they don't call you the Golden Wolf for nothing. I doubt those nobles ever would have gotten this far on their own."

"Thanks."

"Given what you already know, I wouldn't be stupid enough to make an enemy of the Golden Wolf, or the royal family of Ethenell more generally. But this will have an effect on the work I can do in the future. So I won't talk for free."

I had expected this answer, so I proceeded to offer up some information I'd gathered that I thought he might like to know about.

"All right," the man said after pondering this for a spell. "You've got yourself a deal. But I can only tell you so much."

"Sure, I'm fine with whatever you feel you can tell me."

If he told me too much, he'd probably put himself in danger. But I did gain some new information from him. It concerned someone working behind the scenes in Sorcié.

"I've said a bit too much, so I think I'll go live in another country for a while," said the man as he got up to leave. I watched him depart, then made my next move, following the new lead I'd just acquired.

A few days after my discussion with the man in the tavern, I had finally determined the whereabouts of this figure who lurked behind the scenes. Just like the last time, together with Janne, I slipped out of the castle under cover of darkness, heading to a new destination in town.

This place was close to the center of town—and very brightly lit. It was so different from where I'd met my informant last time that I actually started to doubt it was the right place. Looking into the restaurant, I saw people eating, drinking, making noise, and having a good time. This was the exact opposite of the atmosphere in the previous place.

After stepping inside, I had my work cut out for me locating the person I was after. This was more like a dining hall for large crowds, and was full of people—young and old, men and women. When I finally found the man I was after, I saw him grinning as he drank his liquor and ate his meal. He had a beautiful woman on either side, both fawning over him.

My reaction was difficult to describe. At first, I was just stunned, but then his utter nonchalance started to awaken an indescribable fear inside me. According to my information, this man had committed some fairly heinous acts, but you'd never guess that from his current appearance. In all my years as a mercenary, I'd never seen anyone who was deeply involved in criminal activity yet gave so little indication of it. After quickly wiping my now uncharacteristically sweaty palms on my clothes, I approached the man, smiling as I did so.

"A lady on each arm, I see. How enviable."

"I bet," he said, before reaching out with both arms to pull the women closer to himself.

The women both shrieked coquettishly, and smiles broke across their faces. I doubted that any ordinary drunk would have provoked this reaction from them, but anyhow, this man was good-looking. With his refined features and warm smile, he seemed like he'd be popular with women.

"I'd like to spend some time with these ladies myself. Mind if I sit across from you?" I asked, after noting there were a lot of other diners sharing tables.

"Hmmm," intoned the man, inclining his head in thought before saying, "If I let a handsome fellow like you butt in, you might snatch them from me, just when we were getting close. So I hope you'll accept my refusal."

Though he said this in a jocular fashion, it was still a rejection.

I pondered how to deal with this obstacle, but before I could say anything, the girls chimed in.

"Goodness, don't you know we're both crazy about you?" said one, addressing the man. "We won't be won over so easily by another man."

"That's right," said the other woman. "So please, mister, feel free to join us."

With smiles on their faces, they both encouraged me to sit down.

Though I don't like to brag, women also find my *face quite appealing. Looks like that came in handy.*

"Thanks," I said to the women, before quickly sitting down in the empty chair and ordering myself a drink and a meal.

"Mister, are you from another country?" asked one of the man's companions with evident interest. I made sure to give noncommittal answers to their questions.

As I spoke with them, I learned the women had simply hit it off with the man when he came to this eatery, and had decided to keep him company. It wasn't as if they'd known each other for any great length of time.

The very idea that he had managed to snag these two women in such a short period of time, and become familiar enough with them that they didn't complain when he put his arms around them, told me that he was an even bigger womanizer than I'd been told. However, just talking with the man in this setting gave the impression that he didn't have any skeletons in his closet. He seemed like nothing more than a cheerful fellow who just really liked women.

When I asked him what he did for work, he told me, almost absentmindedly, that he was employed by another nearby shop. His mannerisms, too, were like those of any ordinary commoner, giving off no impression that he was a former nobleman.

After we had spoken for a while, the women said that they would have to be heading home, and got up to leave.

With that being the case, naturally the man also stood up to accompany them.

"It's no fun drinking with only men for company, so I'll have to excuse myself," he said, and started to leave the table.

If I let this man get away now, and he's more cautious from now on, I might not get another chance to question him.

"We're just getting to know each other," I said, desperate to keep the man here. "Why not stay a little longer? Please, tell me more about etiquette in Sorcié's noble society." I thought this might get some kind of reaction out of the man, but he replied without moving an eyebrow.

"Ha ha ha, what are you talking about? Perhaps you've confused me for someone else? Or maybe you're already drunk? If so, you'd better head back to your lodgings quickly."

He really didn't react at all. Could my information be wrong? Although, well, I really don't think that man would have given me false information.

To test the waters, I decided to let slip one of the details I'd been told. If he really had nothing to do with the conspiracy, I doubted he'd even understand what it meant, so I saw no problem with saying it.

Even after hearing it, the man's expression still didn't change. But then...

"Looks like you're cleverer than I thought," he said, and grinned.

After seeing the look on his face, I finally felt certain that the information I'd been given was accurate.

"I can't talk here," the man declared. "Let's go somewhere else."

I followed him as he, with the bottle he'd been drinking from in hand, staggered out of the dining hall. After slipping down an alleyway on one side of the place, he leaned back against one of the walls. He noticed my wary look.

"Don't worry, I won't do anything to you," he drawled, urging me to come closer.

After confirming that Janne was close enough that he could quickly run over to help me if needed, I joined the man, standing beside him and leaning back against the wall in the same way. Despite this apparently relaxed posture, I remained tense enough that I could move at a moment's notice.

"So, what made the Prince of Ethenell want to come looking for an old has-been like me?"

Just as I thought, he already knew my true identity. When I considered that, in spite of this knowledge, he still hadn't changed his expression, I felt my palms start to sweat again. That was the caliber of man I was dealing with. From the little he'd already heard, he probably knew that I was seeking more information. *But... With that stupid grin on his face, I can't discern what he's thinking at all.*

It didn't look like bargaining with him would get me anywhere. After accepting that I'd have to abandon that avenue, I opted to be direct about what I hoped to learn.

"I want information about the people you've worked with in committing your various crimes up till now."

When the man heard this, there was, for the first time, a definite change in his expression. First he opened his eyes wide in shock, then he began to laugh raucously.

"I didn't expect you to be so blunt. You might be more fun than I thought."

"So, are you going to tell me?"

"Huh? No way."

I was silent. He had rejected me without a second thought.

It's a long shot, but I guess I have no choice. I can but try.

"Is there anything I can do to make it worth your while? If you'd like a new title in Ethenell, I can arrange something for you."

"Titles, huh? Not interested. Can't you see how much fun I'm having now that I'm free of them?" said the man.

"So," I couldn't help but reply, "are you saying you *deliberately* left the house of a marquess in that state of affairs?"

The man just grinned in response. His expression sent a shiver down my spine.

I had thought his story was strange, ever since I first heard it. After dodging an investigation by some of the most capable members of Sorcié's upper echelons, and without having left a shred of evidence of his involvement in the plot, how could it be that he had made one slipup that cost him his status and left him a commoner?

Now I was starting to think that, just maybe, the man had done so on purpose. The incident that had cost the man his title didn't seem to have much to do with the man himself. He was a man to be pitied, his title stolen from him simply as the fallout of misconduct by his closest relations and everyone else around him. That was the conclusion that the people in Sorcié's top echelon had reached. After investigating thoroughly, they had decided there was no way that he could have been involved in the incident.

I wonder about that. I think he must have been involved after all. He fooled the greatest minds in Sorcié's upper echelon, and played the part of a man to be pitied.

"Don't you have anything to say for yourself, using those closest to you to serve your own interests?" Knowing the facts of the case, I couldn't stop a stern note from entering my voice.

"Not at all," the man replied, wearing a look of utter indifference.

It seemed that my own sense of right and wrong didn't apply here. That's what I sensed when I looked at the man's face.

"Ha ha ha, I'm nothing but a commoner now, an old has-been. There's nothing left for you to gain from getting involved. If you just want to curry favor with Sorcié, I bet the information you already have is enough." Here the man paused for a moment, then grinned and said, "If you dig too deeply, it might get the people you care about hurt."

Though a smile played on his lips, there was not even the hint of a smile in his eyes. I fancied that I saw a profound darkness lurking behind those gray eyes. The instincts I had honed during my time as a mercenary sounded the alarm bell, warning me that he was dangerous, so I edged away from him.

The man seemed to be enjoying himself as he watched me back off.

"Don't worry, as long as you don't dig any deeper, I won't do anything," he said. "It's getting late, so why don't you run along, Your Highness?"

This time, he really did walk away, but I couldn't bring myself to pursue him any further.

"Are you okay?" asked Janne, running over to me as soon as the man was gone.

"I don't think we should mess with him. Let's call it quits with the information we already have," I declared. We then returned to our lodgings in the palace.

★★★★★★

A few days had passed since I went sightseeing with Cezar. Today was a typical day for me, spent at the Magical Ministry. Once we finished work for the day, Maria and I helped Cyrus harvest vegetables from the plot he kept on the grounds of the Ministry. At this time of year, there were a lot of vegetables that had to be yanked out of the ground, so we were covered in quite a lot of mud by the end, but that just spoke to how many vegetables there were to pull up, and to how big they were. I was really excited.

"These potatoes sure grew nicely. Both in size and number, these are totally different from my vegetable patch," I said, praising Cyrus as I looked at one of the potatoes I'd yanked out of the dirt.

Cyrus looked pleased.

"Yes. They really didn't grow much at first. After I began using some fertilizer I bought from a nearby farmer, they started to do much better."

"Oh, fertilizer, you say? What kind?"

"The farmer kept cattle, so this fertilizer was made from cow manure; it's really very good. It's popular among farmers in the area."

"Ah, I see... Fertilizer made from cow manure?" I said, a little disappointed.

"Ah, right," Cyrus responded with a disheartened look. "I suppose you are a young noblewoman, after all. I guess fertilizer made from cow manure wouldn't be suitable for you."

Why did he say "I suppose *you are a young noblewoman"? Is that meant to be a put-down? Well, I'll choose to take it as a compliment.*

"No, I actually think cow manure is a good fertilizer, and I'd like to use anything that is well regarded by farmers, but..."

Yes, manure is good fertilizer. In fact, my grandma in my past life used to use manure she bought from some relatives who lived in our neighborhood and kept cattle. I used to help them mix it up. However...

"If I scattered fertilizer made from manure in the gardens of Claes Manor, then mother... Um, my mom would get *really* angry with me..."

As mother had once put it while lecturing me in a seriously menacing tone, "I have already given up on the appearance of the garden. But this stench is more than I can stand. I cannot allow an odor like this to hang over the gardens of the House of Duke Claes!" By the way, several of the servants had also complained that the smell was hard to be around, so using cow manure as fertilizer on my field at Claes Manor was forbidden from that day forth.

After I told Cyrus the whole story, he spoke again.

"I see. Come to think of it, the vegetable patch you have at home does lie within the gardens of a duke. This plot I have here, at the Magical Ministry, is out of the way and downwind, so any smell it makes won't end up bothering anyone at the Ministry. But a duke's manor really is a different story. Even if you took countermeasures to curtail the smell, you couldn't eliminate it entirely."

It seemed like Cyrus did have some countermeasures in mind, but in the end, we agreed that it would be too hard for me to make cow manure work at home, so I would have to give up on the idea.

However, I did ask him to keep an eye out for manure with a less strong odor, and to tell me if he came up with any promising ways to counteract the smell. I decided I'd try looking around myself as well. After seeing how well his potatoes had grown, I couldn't help but be drawn to the cow manure.

I seemed to remember my grandma in my past life telling me that you just needed to mix the fertilizer well. But I really tried hard to mix the fertilizer I used at Claes Manor, and people still complained that it smelled.

What if, alongside the fertilizer, I try scattering something that has a pleasant aroma, stronger than the smell of cow manure? If I mix in something like lavender, maybe even cow manure would smell nice? It might be worth experimenting with that.

While I was thinking about cow manure, and busily digging up more potatoes, Cyrus called out to us.

"It's about time we took a break."

Since Cyrus had been put to work on farms ever since he was a kid, he naturally knew how to take efficient breaks in between periods of work. He'd suggested this break at the perfect time.

Cyrus brought out some tea and pickles to go with it, so we enjoyed those as we took a short break.

"Ah... We harvested a lot of good potatoes, didn't we?"

"Yes, indeed. I'm amazed by how many there were. Will these be donated to the orphanage as well?" asked Maria.

"I think so," answered Cyrus, who'd finally learned to speak normally while working with her in the field. "That's my intention." Though his cheeks were definitely a bit redder than they were when he spoke to me.

"The children will be delighted. They were certainly pleased to see the last batch of vegetables we brought," said Maria with a smile.

"Yeah. What were the last vegetables you took to the orphanage?"

When I asked what kind of vegetables she had delivered when Cezar and I met her, she told me those were potatoes too.

Just how many potatoes have you grown, Cyrus?

"This plot covers quite a wide area, so I felt like growing a lot of varieties," said Cyrus, noticing the odd look I was giving him and seeming a little embarrassed.

Oh no, there's nothing wrong with that.

"He gave me a lot of potatoes as well, more than I could eat myself. So I sent some home, and my mother sent back a letter saying they were absolutely delicious."

Oho, so Cyrus gave Maria her own share, and even Maria's mom tried some? Though they're moving really slowly, I'm glad to see their relationship progressing. However, there was one point that bothered me.

"You *sent* the potatoes home? Maria, haven't you been back home? I haven't heard you talk about going back lately."

Since entering employment at the Magical Ministry, Maria had been living in a dormitory at the Ministry. There were a lot of workers there who did the same, but a lot of them apparently went home on their days off, provided their family homes weren't too far away. I thought that Maria used to go home pretty frequently, but I hadn't heard her mention doing so recently, so I felt like asking.

"I've been busy with a lot of commitments recently, and haven't been able to visit. But I have a day off tomorrow and intend to go home then," answered Maria with a smile.

"I see. So you're going home tomorrow? I'm sure your mom will be pleased. Enjoy your day off."

"I shall," said Maria, smiling again.

I asked her to let me come and visit with her again some other time, as our break finished and we returned to work digging up potatoes. Before long, we had dug up all the potatoes in the part of the field we had planned to harvest, placing them in baskets, and our work was finished for the day.

Maria and Cyrus both lived in Ministry dorms, whereas I had to return home by carriage, so this was when we normally parted ways. However, today Cyrus said he wanted to walk me to the gates.

Is this going to be another discussion about Maria, or a gushing report of their burgeoning love?

When it came to discussions of love, Cyrus—who typically played the part of a hardworking, somewhat strict department head—had no one to talk to besides me. So, from time to time, he would ask to escort me to my carriage and, on our way there, tell me things like, "I had a long chat with Miss Maria," or "I got to walk with her side by side." His reports of romance always made me think that, in the world of my past life, an elementary schooler probably would have gotten further by now.

He did share his potatoes with me, and I got to hear some information about fertilizer, so, well, I guess I'll hear what he has to say, was more or less how I felt when I said okay to him. But Cyrus did not have his usual topics in mind today.

"I just wanted to ask you about Maria's recent delivery of vegetables to the orphanage. Apparently, a strange man came up to talk to her."

"Well, that was probably just because Maria is cute, right? That sort of thing happens quite a lot." After all, Maria was the kind of beauty who would make anyone look twice. I had seen guys like that approach Maria before, when we were walking together.

"No, Maria seems to be fairly used to that kind of thing, and knows how to deal with it. There was something about this man that just felt strange."

"Felt strange?"

"She apparently experienced the same kind of uneasy feeling that she gets when faced with Dark Magic. But once she lightly turned down the man's advances, he immediately left. She watched him walk away, but was unable to see any signs of Dark Magic..."

As a Wielder of Light, Maria was able to see Dark Magic. If Maria couldn't see any Dark Magic, then there couldn't have been any there. Although, I was still concerned to hear that he had given her the same uneasy feeling.

Also, the bodyguards Cyrus had sent to keep an eye on Maria in secret (*Wait, there were bodyguards there?!*) had also witnessed the moment the man approached her, but hadn't noticed anything strange about him.

"Just to be safe, Maria came to me to report the encounter. But since there was no definitive threat, I hesitated to take action."

"Action? Are you thinking of looking for the man?"

"That's right. This is Maria Campbell we're talking about. If she felt something was off with the man, we should track him down. But Maria didn't remember his face clearly, and the bodyguards only observed him from a distance. If we're going to search for him, it won't be easy."

This somehow sounds like a more serious situation than I thought. But...

"Why did you come to talk to me about this? Do you think I should help guard Maria when I'm with her, like when we work on the covenants together?" I asked, thinking this sounded likely enough. But Cyrus blinked in surprise, then shook his head vigorously.

Oh, was I wrong? Just when I thought I'd managed to read between the lines for once.

"No, I'm not looking for your help guarding Maria. I'd just like you to be careful as well."

"Why do I need to be careful?"

"If the Wielders of Darkness are taking action against Maria, you might be a target as well. Maria may be a powerful Wielder of Light, but you possess Dark Magic, which puts you in an unusual position," said Cyrus with a serious look on his face. I remembered that Jeffrey had previously told me much the same thing at the palace.

A fearsome opponent, whose true identity they still can't discern, may target me.

I was sure that Cyrus hadn't yet managed to find out that much about our foes, but he probably still had a feeling that something bad might happen. As far as I was concerned, he was just my somewhat wimpy farming buddy, but now I remembered that he was actually a very capable person.

"Thank you very much for your concern. I'll be careful," I said.

"Good," said Cyrus with a nod. Then, after watching me board my carriage, he turned and walked away.

After sitting down in my carriage seat, I sighed.

Don't tell me Maria might be in danger too.

Though Maria was a Wielder of Light, Light Magic was mostly used to heal people, and had no offensive spells, so self-defense would be difficult for her. Still, it sounded like she had bodyguards, even if she herself hadn't agreed to the arrangement... But when it came to Dark Magic, which was capable of controlling people's minds, she still couldn't be said to be absolutely safe. I'd faced off against Sarah—a user of Dark Magic—myself, so I was all the more worried.

I prayed that the man Maria had met, who gave her the same uneasy feeling that Dark Magic did, wasn't related to the organization of Dark Magic users.

★★★★★★

I submitted the information I'd been able to gather—in my capacity as Cezar Dahl, Prince of Ethenell—to the people who worked in the highest echelon of Sorcié's government. Naturally, I included a request to receive some consideration in return. It was not long before the information I provided was used as evidence in the arrest of the noblemen behind the conspiracy. Apparently, Sorcié's top officials were thrown into disarray by the arrest of such high-ranking nobles.

Even so, as one of the contributors to the investigation, I received a certain amount of information from them in return. The noblemen under arrest had been interrogated, but none of their testimonies seemed to add up. As I read the report, it became apparent that none of them had acted of their own accord, but had instead followed someone else's orders. While I was thinking over this, I was interrupted.

"Cezar, we might be in trouble," said Janne, returning to our quarters in a panic.

"What's wrong?"

"Though I didn't make contact with that man, I did investigate him."

"Janne, we agreed we wouldn't have anything more to do with him, didn't we? What if something happens?!"

"I know, sorry for worrying you. But I never got involved with him directly. I only gathered information from the people around him."

"I see. That's fine, then, but seriously, be careful."

"I know. Now, about him, it sounds like he made contact with Maria Campbell."

"Maria Campbell, you say?"

He was talking about that beautiful woman who was so close to Katarina I might have thought they were deeply in love. She was the foremost Wielder of Light in all of Sorcié. Perhaps the man's encounter with her had something to do with that fact.

"A Wielder of Light poses a threat to anyone who wishes to commit wicked acts. However, if he only made contact with her, can't we just wait and see what happens?"

"About that... He encountered her even before we met with him. After that, we provided the kingdom with information about the crimes of the nobles he was also involved with, and they were all arrested. The situation has changed. Maria Campbell knows a way to use Light Magic to influence people's mental states, and encourage them to confess their crimes. That man surely must consider her an obstacle right now."

That's right. That mysterious spell that Maria used during the incident at that harbor town. She can render a criminal temporarily reformed, and make them confess their crimes. Indeed, if she were to use it under these circumstances, that would be extremely vexatious for that man.

A gag order was in effect for everyone who had been there to witness that magic at work. However, now that we knew not everyone involved in that incident was arrested on the spot, the chances of that information having been leaked seemed high.

"Sorcié still doesn't know what that man has been up to. For the sake of Maria Campbell's safety, we had better inform them," said Janne. I agreed.

"You're right. For starters, let's contact the Magical Ministry, where she works, and tell them to be careful."

"I thought you might say that, so I already contacted them," said Janne with a composed look. I guess I should have expected as much from someone who'd worked alongside me for so many years.

As I was expressing my praise for Janne, a servant came to our room and brought us a response from the Magical Ministry.

"Oh, they sure act quick. That's a big help," I said, running my eyes over the message before burying my face in my hands.

"What's wrong?" asked Janne, frowning.

"Of all the... Today, Maria Campbell has gone to visit her family home. They say that, unbeknownst to Maria herself, she is attended by bodyguards, so there's nothing to worry about, but..."

Under normal circumstances, if she had bodyguards chosen by the Magical Ministry, then there wouldn't be anything to fear. However, if that man was serious about taking Maria out of the picture, she might not be entirely safe even with bodyguards. My intuition, honed on the battlefield in struggles of life and death, told me so.

"Janne, do you know where Maria Campbell's family lives?"

"I do, but are you planning on going?"

"Yeah, I can't help but worry about her. Relax; if it turns out there was no threat, I'll take another educational tour in town, then come back. But I'll have to miss my next appointment. Can you cancel that for me?"

"Got it," Janne eventually answered after remaining silent for a spell. “Leave that stuff to me. But you be careful. If anything happens to you, there’ll be quite the commotion.”

“Yeah, I know. Right, you take care of the rest,” I declared, before immediately setting about preparing to depart. As I got ready, I prayed that nothing bad would happen in the meantime.

★★★★★★

The day after our potato harvest, I heard that Maria had gone home for her day off, just as planned. Her unacknowledged bodyguards would be nearby, so I figured she’d be okay. But after what I’d heard from Cyrus yesterday, I was a little worried.

At this moment, I was in the middle of a session deciphering the Dark Covenant. Without Maria around, I worked alone, and I found it even harder to concentrate on a task that was already hard to focus on. My eyelids might begin to droop at any moment. The warm sunlight streaming into the room and my full belly worked together to summon the sandman.

Ahh, I can’t hold out any longer. My eyelids feel so heavy. I’m at my limit.

I saw a room with pink walls, and a bed with a metal frame and an azure duvet on top. In the center of the room was a black table. This was the room of my best friend in my past life, Acchan.

Ah, looks like I get to have this dream again.

Ever since I joined the Magical Ministry, I had suddenly had this dream a few times, and it had always proven very helpful. That was because I was able to watch Acchan playing *Fortune Lover II* in the dream. When I watched her playing the game, I got to infer all kinds of details about the game’s story, and start planning my own countermeasures.

All right, time to watch carefully! It looked like Acchan had already started playing, and Maria was displayed on the screen.

“Who might you be?” she said.

“Who the devil are you?” was the next line, and Cezar appeared.

Ooh, so this time she’s playing Cezar’s route. Cezar is here right now, so this is timely.

However, after the game progressed to the next scene, I was no longer able to maintain this attitude.

“My, though I may not know that man over there, you and I have spoken many times before, Maria. Have you forgotten?" was the next line, and a woman in a black hood appeared.

Her name was displayed as "???"

Eh? Isn't that Katarina? Is Katarina an evildoer again?!

"Who are you...?" asked Maria.

"My, have you actually forgotten about me? I'm so devastated." The woman threw back her hood, revealing her face...

"You're...Lady Katarina Claes."

Yep, that figures. I knew it. Though I kind of feel like I've already had this exact dream. Is this déjà vu?

"It's been a while, Maria Campbell," said Katarina, the corners of her mouth turning up in a sinister smile.

"Lady Claes, I had heard that you were exiled from the kingdom... What are you doing here?"

"That's right, thanks to you, I was exiled... But I've returned. Returned to take my revenge against you!"

As Katarina grinned, Maria started to look frightened. Cezar then stepped in front of Maria, as if to protect her.

"Sorry, but this woman is mine. I won't let you so much as scratch her."

"Tee hee, do you really think an outsider like you can stand against me, now that I am a Wielder of Darkness? Cerberus, come forth," cried Katarina.

Then the narration displayed the line "From out of her shadow, there emerged an enormous wolf," on the screen, and a giant version of Pochi appeared.

Now that I'd seen this, I was absolutely certain—this was exactly the same dream I'd had before. *Why am I being shown the same event? I want to see a new one. I only get so many of these dreams, and you're showing me reruns? This is such a waste!*

"Okay, if I can just defeat Katarina here and turn her over to the authorities, I'll complete the route," said Acchan. Even this line was exactly the same as the last dream I'd had about her. What a pity.

In the next screen transition, I saw Pochi—aka Cerberus—lunge at Cezar, who met the wolf in battle with his sword.

"Prince Cezar!" cried Maria, unleashing her Light Magic on Pochi—I mean, Cerberus.

Cerberus flinched at this attack, and fled back to Katarina's side. This made Katarina scowl dramatically.

"You all attack them too. Finish them!" After she said this line befitting one of the leaders of an evil organization, inexplicably, some guys who looked like stereotypical evil henchmen appeared and attacked Cezar and Maria.

Oh, so Katarina didn't come alone. More importantly, when was she promoted to a leadership position in this evil organization?

But the underlings Lieutenant Katarina had unleashed were quickly taken down by Cezar. It looked like none of them were strong enough to oppose him.

Lieutenant Katarina scowled dramatically once more.

"Grr, now you've done it. If this is what it's come to..."

After delivering this line that any representative might make—or a certain villainous bacterium I remembered from the anime of my past life—she whipped out a black staff.

Ah. But Katarina in the game doesn't have a skull on her staff, so I guess I'm winning in terms of villainy style points, I thought as I watched Katarina take her staff...and unleash some kind of black magic from it! *So Katarina in the game actually knows how to use Dark Magic! She's far better at it than I am, since I can only absorb it.*

However, even when Game Katarina attacked Maria with all her might, her darkness was pushed back by Maria's Light Magic, until she found herself enveloped in light and forced to kneel on the ground.

It looks like Katarina has been defeated. Although...

"Are you all right?" some people who looked like officials asked out of concern for Maria, conveniently turning up only after all the fighting was settled.

Seriously, you guys, you were too slow! Cezar and Maria already defeated them all.

The authorities took Katarina away, and a lovey-dovey exchange began between Maria and Cezar. Moments later...

"Oh my, Maria," said a voice, which turned out to be Maria's mother, holding a shopping basket.

It seemed that this whole event had taken place near Maria's family home. After a brief exchange with her mother, Maria said, "This is someone very special to me," introducing Cezar.

Then Cezar announced, "I would like to start a happy life with Maria."

This really was the end of the Cezar route.

Yep, yep, how nice. Congratulations, Cezar and Maria, and *farewell, Katarina. On no account should you ever do anything wicked again.*

This was surely the final game event that could take place while Cezar was in Sorcié to study.

I wonder when this is set to take place. If I heed this warning and make sure I don't go there during that event... Will that be enough to make sure they're okay? But since Game Katarina acted like a lieutenant in the evil organization, maybe they'll just send someone else in my place. In that case Maria and Cezar will still be attacked...

"Katarina, Lady Katarina."

As I heard someone's voice calling me, I opened my eyes and snapped to attention to see a familiar face in front of me.

"Sophia?"

"Indeed," replied Sophia with a smile. Then, frowning slightly, she said, "I beg your pardon. You looked like you were having a nightmare, so I woke you up."

"No, no, I shouldn't have been sleeping on the job, so I'm glad you woke me up. Thanks." If left to my own devices, I might have gone on sleeping all afternoon. "Wait, huh? What are you doing here, Sophia?"

"I came here to help out today, and decided I'd come and see how you were doing when I finished, Lady Katarina."

My friends Sophia and Mary sometimes came to the Magical Ministry to help out. It would appear that this was one of those days.

"I thought that Miss Maria might just be out of the office for a while, but could this in fact be her day off?" asked Sophia.

"Yep, she said she'll be visiting family today. Yesterday, she told me she's been so busy recently that she hasn't found the time to go home, and she was looking forward to finally getting to visit," I said in answer to Sophia's question, as the scene from the game I'd just watched in my dream, and my thoughts from that moment, surfaced in my mind.

The event occurred during Cezar's study trip, Maria was visiting her home for the first time in a while, and Katarina, apparently an evil lieutenant now, appeared with underlings in tow. Then I recalled how a man had appeared in front of Maria who gave her the same uneasy feeling that Dark Magic did. An indescribable feeling of anxiety took hold inside my chest.

I know the chances are slim, but what if today *is the day of the event when Maria is attacked...? No, that can't be right. There's no way.*

But now that the thought had occurred to me, I could not easily dispel my worries. I quickly rose to my feet. If it turned out there was nothing to worry about, then I could calm down.

"Lady Katarina?" said Sophia, seeming perplexed.

"I've just remembered that there's something I need to do, so I'm going to go and ask if I can leave work early today," I declared, before running back to my department's office.

When I made it to the office, I saw Raphael was just coming out of the entrance, so I told him I wanted to leave early.

"I don't really mind if you leave early, but are you all right? You're not unwell, are you?"

Since I hadn't given him a reason, he was worried about me. That made sense. *I need a good excuse... But I can't think of anything.*

"Um, I'd like to go and see Maria."

"You want to see Maria? I'm pretty sure she went to visit her home today."

"Yes, that's right, but for some reason I feel like something bad might be about to happen to her. So I'm concerned." Having no excuse, I just said exactly what was on my mind.

I worried he might think I was a real weirdo, but Raphael just widened his eyes slightly.

"Understood. In that case, I'll grant you permission to use one of the Ministry's carriages, so please take it and hurry."

To my surprise, he even arranged for me to take a carriage.

"Um, I know it might sound strange for me to be asking this, but do you really believe what I just told you?" I was shocked that he'd accepted it so easily.

"I see your point. If it were anyone else, I might doubt them, but you aren't the kind of person who would lie or jest about this sort of thing. And I can't easily dismiss your intuition," Raphael added with a slight frown. "I'll give you a magical tool you can use to contact us if anything happens. Please take the utmost care." With these words of warning, Raphael handed me a magical tool and sent me on my way.

And so I ended up in a carriage headed straight to the town where Maria's family home was. Rattling as it went, my carriage arrived at the town where Maria lived, and I asked the driver to let me disembark near her house.

The uneasy feeling inside my chest never subsided during the journey. I still felt restless as I walked in the direction of Maria's house, when suddenly I saw another carriage stop nearby, arriving at nearly the same time I had.

Surely this isn't a lieutenant of the organization, someone like Katarina, I wondered as I braced myself for a fight, but the person who actually stepped out was just as surprising to me.

"Cezar?!"

"Katarina?!" he cried—apparently just as shocked to see me—our startled exclamations overlapping each other.

"What are you doing here of all places?" I asked.

"I might ask you the same thing. What are *you* doing here, of all places?"

"I-I just had this uneasy feeling all of a sudden, and felt like checking on Maria..." I stated honestly, unsure of how best to evade his question.

Cezar looked absolutely stunned.

"Do you have some kind of special ability for sensing danger?"

"Eh? Ah. No, just a hunch." I was worried that I'd been horribly misunderstood, so I issued a hurried denial.

"A hunch?" repeated Cezar, looking even more bewildered.

Ah, this isn't going so well. However, Cezar's appearance here means the probability of that game event occurring today has just increased.

"Really! But none of that matters—let's just hurry!" I urged him, sensing that a full explanation would be too much trouble.

Cezar furrowed his brow.

"I'm not entirely convinced, but I agree that we should hurry," he said, and we both ran in the direction of Maria's house.

"As a young noblewoman of Sorcié, are you sure you want to be seen running around with your skirt hiked up?"

"This is no time to be worrying about that kind of thing."

During this exchange, we arrived at Maria's house to find nothing out of the ordinary, at least from where we stood outside the door. The curtains were drawn, so we couldn't see inside.

Come to think of it, wasn't Maria supposed to be unofficially attended by bodyguards? I wonder where they are.

I looked around, but couldn't spot anyone fitting that description. Just as I'd done when I visited Maria's house in the past, I approached the door and knocked before calling out.

“Excuse me?”

No voice answered from inside. *However…*

“I sense that someone’s in there,” murmured Cezar.

Right. Though nobody answered, I also have a feeling that someone is inside. I tried to open the door, but it was locked and didn’t budge. *What should we do?*

“Forgive me for doing this, but this is an emergency. I promise I’ll pay for it afterward,” said Cezar, before proceeding to slam his body against the door, busting it open.

This act was so sudden, I stood there with my mouth hanging open for a moment. But without the door in the way, I could see inside, and I quickly regained my bearings. Having visited Maria’s house several times before, I knew that after entering through the front door, we would find a table and the kitchen. In this respect, its interior was like that of any commoner’s home, but Maria’s family had furnished the space so that, though it was modest, it always felt warm and cozy.

But we found in the normally charming dining space a terrible mess. The chairs had been knocked over, and there was a person lying face down on the floor. At first I thought it might be Maria, and ran over in a panic, but I was mistaken. Though she looked a lot like Maria, when I saw how long her hair was, I realized it was her mother.

“Are you okay, ma’am?” I called out to her desperately, crouching down to put my hand on her shoulder, but there was no reply.

Seeing Maria’s mother—who had always greeted me so warmly—passed out on the floor, I felt the blood drain from my face.

Cezar then took my hand and pulled me back, before holding his own hand against her mouth and throat.

“Don’t worry. She’s still breathing, and she has a pulse. But she may have hit her head or something, in which case it’d be dangerous to move her,” he said calmly.

When I heard this, I felt just a little bit calmer myself.

“How could this have happened to Maria’s mother? And just look at the room…”

Taking a good look around, I noticed that not only had the chairs been knocked over, but the floor was covered in dirt, and some plates had been knocked off the table and smashed on the floor. It was worse than I’d thought. I started to feel angry, wondering who would do such a thing, which was followed by an unfamiliar feeling of coldness deep in my heart.

Then we heard a loud bang from deeper inside the house. I knew instantly that it was made by the door to Maria's room.

I immediately stood up and headed to Maria's room, but Cezar was quicker than I was, and had pressed his ear against the door before I got there. He then gestured for me to stand back, placed one hand on the hilt of the sword he wore at his waist, and threw the door open with his other hand.

Having visited Maria's room several times before, I'd always found it modest, yet warm—like Maria herself. But now we found it in a state similar to the kitchen and dining area, with her desk and chair knocked over.

And there were some rough-looking men standing inside—looking much like the underlings I'd seen the evil lieutenant Katarina commanding in my dream. The only thing that was different was the fact that it wasn't Katarina standing in front of the men, but rather a woman with black hair—Sarah.

And Maria—who in the game would have been standing safely behind Cezar—was enveloped in darkness. To put it more accurately, she had been constricted by something that looked like an enormous black snake, until she had gone completely limp. Even from where I was standing, I could see her face was pale.

"Maria?!"

What a horrible thing to do! I felt a powerful rage rising inside me once again, while at the same time the icy feeling deep in my chest became colder still.

Without delay, Cezar entered the room and knocked the nearest man to the floor with the sheath of his sword.

While looking at Maria's seemingly lifeless body, I formed my skull-topped staff in a state of dreamlike detachment. I had always managed to rapidly absorb any darkness that I'd produced myself. And in the past—with help from Jeord and Keith—I was able to absorb Sarah's darkness, even as it kept me confined. This giant snake-looking thing had to be made of darkness too. So my magic, which could absorb darkness, should work here. Or so I believed, as I desperately pictured myself absorbing the darkness, directing my magic at the black snake.

With a slurping sound, the snake's tail was sucked into my staff. *Great! It's working!* I tried even harder to picture my goal. *Suck up* *that snake!* With an even louder slurping sound, the snake was absorbed entirely into my staff.

Sarah and the men with her regarded Cezar and me with stunned faces. Perhaps they were struggling to keep up with this sudden turn of events.

While they were still stunned, Cezar took down another man with his sword.

After the snake of darkness had entirely vanished inside my staff, nothing was holding Maria up anymore, and she nearly fell to the floor. But Cezar quickly caught her.

Sarah's men finally seemed to come to their senses, tightened their grips on their own swords, and swung them at Cezar while he was still holding Maria. Their attack was so sudden, I was unable to respond—though I still had my staff held at the ready—and Cezar, who had his hands full with Maria, couldn't counter with his sword either.

With Maria still in his arms, Cezar dodged the men's swords and hit the floor. But, perhaps partly because he was holding Maria, he didn't manage to dodge them completely, and I saw red gush from his arm—his clothes quickly became bloodstained.

The atrocious state of the room, Maria's mother unconscious on the floor, and now Maria, pale and lifeless—my rage had reached its peak. When blood sprayed from Cezar's arm before my very eyes, I felt like I heard something snap inside me.

They'll pay for this...

As this thought passed through my mind, it brought with it a strange sensation I'd never felt before. It was as if the iciness that had taken root deep inside me had overflowed, rushing throughout my body. This sensation made me feel sick to my stomach.

My hand—which I had dropped to my side, still holding my staff—now rose swiftly as if controlled by an outside force. I just looked on as if this was all happening to someone else. Then my hand swept down slowly, and a deep darkness gushed forth from the end of my staff. I'd never produced that much darkness myself, but it just kept on flowing and flowing, until there was a huge black mass.

Then the shapeless cloud of darkness seemed to assume a form all by itself. It turned into the very same snake that had been constricting Maria moments earlier. But now it was a couple of sizes bigger. This giant snake slithered across the floor, headed for

Sarah's men. Their faces contorted with fear, and even Sarah's eyes were as wide as saucers. Then, after reaching the men, the snake wrapped its immense body around them, as they tried desperately to flee.

"Urk."

"Spare us."

"Stop, I beg you."

They all cried out, their faces contorted in pain—but it felt like I was just watching this play out in a game. It didn't feel real at all. In fact, I think I would have been more emotionally invested in a game. It was difficult to put into words, but it was as if I felt nothing for them at all.

I was more concerned about the icy feeling that had emerged from inside of me, which still seemed to be roaring throughout my body like a blizzard—one slowly eating away at me from within.

It's so cold. So, so cold.

I gradually lost my sense of anything besides the cold. I did have the impression of someone saying something to me, very far away, but I couldn't focus my attention on that. The blizzard howled louder and louder. My head was clouded. I felt like it would be easier if I just relinquished consciousness altogether.

The pitch-black darkness continued to expand.

"Katarina! Hey, Katarina, get a hold of yourself! Come to your senses... Maria and I are safe. We're all right!"

I could faintly hear a voice crying out through the darkness. My field of vision opened up slightly. I could see Cezar, with a desperate look on his face, holding me by the shoulders, his voice raised.

So Maria and Cezar are okay. Thank goodness. Though I'd regained some visibility, and Cezar's voice was just barely coming through, I still couldn't move my own body, or speak at all. The icy blizzard billowing inside me wouldn't stop. *What should I do?*

Seeing Cezar's look of desperation, I realized that if I couldn't return to my normal self, I would be upsetting Maria and everyone else.

I want to go back to normal. I want to stop the blizzard. But how to do it? Though I couldn't move, I realized that I could feel something wet running down my cheeks.

I saw Cezar with his eyes wide open, having brought his elegant face right up close to mine.

Cezar? I was perplexed to see him so close to me. Then I felt something I could only describe as a *chomp*...

"Eh? C-Cezar! What are you doing?!" I screamed, before being so surprised by my own voice that I suddenly clapped my hands over my mouth.

Ah! I can move my hands! I tested my feet next, trying to take a step and finding I could. I was finally able to move my body.

"Good. Looks like you've come to your senses," said Cezar with a relieved expression, as he watched me twirl my arms and legs around.

"Eh? Come to my senses?"

What's he talking about?

"Your eyes went totally black in the middle, and you completely lost control of yourself."

W-Was I really in such a state?! Well, I guess that explains why Cezar looked so desperate when he was trying to get my attention.

"Then you started making all that weird black stuff. I knew I had to do something, or we'd all be in trouble, but calling out to you was no use. If you were a man, I would have just hit you lightly to snap you out of it, but of course, I couldn't raise my hand against a woman. As I wondered what to do, you started crying, which made me even more anxious..." At this point, Cezar's expression turned to one of remorse. "To snap you out of it, I bit you. Sorry for that."

"Huh?!"

When Cezar said this, I was able to recall what had just happened. My field of vision had opened up again, and I saw Cezar calling out to me with a look of desperation on his face. Then his beautiful face came up close to mine. And then, he'd *chomped down on my nose*. Having remembered that, I pressed my hand against my nose.

"Does it hurt?" asked Cezar, sounding concerned.

"No, no, not at all. I was surprised when I was bitten, but it didn't hurt," I declared.

"Really?" said Cezar, with a relieved expression.

That's right. Cezar bit me on the nose, and I was so surprised that I was able to move my body again. Then, before I knew it, that blizzard inside me—that felt so cold before—had stopped.

"It was a spur of the moment thing; even I don't really understand why I did it. At any rate, sorry. Pretend that a dog licked you instead, and forget about it," said Cezar, looking remorseful once again.

But having just been saved by Cezar, I couldn't stand to see him looking so troubled.

"No, I mean, please stop apologizing. Rather, I should be thanking you for saving me. If no one had done anything, I don't know what might have happened."

I felt sure that, if I had given myself over entirely to the icy blizzard raging inside of me, and fully relinquished my consciousness, then I never would have been able to return from the other side. When I considered that possibility, having my nose bitten seemed like no problem at all. In fact, I felt like I couldn't thank Cezar enough.

"It's such a relief to hear you say that," said Cezar, pausing for a moment before adding, "Right, then let's consider that matter settled, and figure out what to do about our situation."

I gasped and finally took a good look at my surroundings. Maria's eyes were still closed, but her complexion looked far healthier than it had when I first saw her, and she was lying peacefully on the floor. The other people, however, had all just collapsed. Not only that, but remnants of a black haze were still clinging to their bodies. It was a very eerie scene.

And I had done that to them.

I could still dimly remember that—mere moments ago—my body had moved on its own, and a mass of darkness that looked like a black snake had emerged from my staff. It was that snake of darkness that had left them in this condition. They were all unconscious, with pained expressions frozen on their faces. Sarah was the only one whose face I couldn't see, since her hair had covered it when she fell, but I felt sure that she had made the same face the others had made.

I had been extremely angered by what they'd done to Maria and her mother, as well as the way they'd injured Cezar, but I hadn't meant to do this to them. I'd only wanted to rescue Maria. *That's all I wanted,* I thought, before involuntarily wrapping my arms around my own body.

Some time had passed since Pochi had become attached to me and I had gained the ability to wield Dark Magic, but this was the first time I'd ever lost control of my powers this way. All this time, I thought I didn't mind possessing these powers, but now I felt really scared. As I felt my body tremble slightly, I wrapped my arms around myself even tighter, but the trembling wouldn't stop. *How strange, I thought the cold coming from inside me had gone away.*

Then Cezar put his own jacket around my shoulders.

"Right now, the only thing you need to worry about is what we can do about this situation. Everything else can wait until later."

Something about the blunt way he put this, and the comfort of the jacket around my shoulders, helped stop the shaking.

He's right. Now we have to think about what to do about our present circumstances. I can deal with my personal problems later. I shook my head to snap myself out of my stupor.

"Ah, Cezar, what about your injury?" The spot where he'd been cut a moment ago was still stained red.

"Ah, don't worry, it's only a scratch." So said Cezar, but his clothes were bright red, and I could still see blood dripping from the wound. There was no way it was only a scratch.

"Please, let me take a look," I said, then I pulled Cezar's arm closer—somewhat forcefully—rolled up his sleeve, and looked at the place where the blood was coming from. Part of Cezar's arm had been cut clean open, with blood gushing from the wound.

I knew it. This isn't a scratch at all, is it? In a panic, I took out my handkerchief and pressed it against the wound, but the blood kept on pouring out, staining my handkerchief bright red. *This is quite a lot of blood. If he keeps bleeding like this, he'll be in trouble.*

As I was quite the rambunctious child in my past life, I had sustained many deep cuts before. There were even times when the blood kept on oozing from injuries, and was not easily stopped. It was my older brother who was closer to me in years—being a fellow repeat offender when it came to getting injured—who had taught me to wrap the wound tight to stop the bleeding in these cases.

I wished I had some kind of cloth I could use to bind the wound, but my handkerchief was already soaked in blood, and it wasn't long enough to wrap around his arm, anyway. After looking around the room, I saw nothing that looked usable.

Okay, if I have no bandages, I'll just have to make one.

I proceeded to rip off part of the hem of my own skirt. I knew from past experience that it would tear quite easily. When I had a length of fabric that looked long enough, I wrapped it around Cezar's arm. I didn't know the proper way to do it. I'd always just copied the way I'd seen my brother do it in my past life. I hoped it would stem the bleeding, even just a little.

The whole time, Cezar was staring at me with a blank look on his face.

"What's the matter?" I asked him.

"Nothing. I was just wondering... Where did you learn to do that?" he inquired with a perplexed look on his face.

Right, your average young noblewomen wouldn't know how to do this. To be fair, this is my first time doing it in this life. I hesitated, unsure of what I should say.

"You sure are full of surprises," Cezar finally said, apparently resigning himself to this reality on his own.

Though I'd only dressed his wound by copying what I'd seen my brother do, somehow it seemed to have worked pretty well. The blood had stopped dripping. *Thank goodness.*

Since Cezar seemed to be all right for the time being, next I went over to Maria, who was still lying on the floor. The color of her face had entirely returned to normal. *Thank goodness. Looks like it was being constricted by that black snake that turned her face so horribly pale.* When I held my hand in front of her mouth, I was able to confirm that she was breathing normally. I felt even more relieved.

Then my concern turned to the unconscious men and Sarah. I was about to go over to them, but Cezar held me back.

"They all *seem* to be unconscious, but we can't say for sure that they aren't still dangerous. Don't be too quick to approach them."

"Ah. Okay."

He could be right. If I got closer and one of them suddenly grabbed me, I wouldn't know what to do.

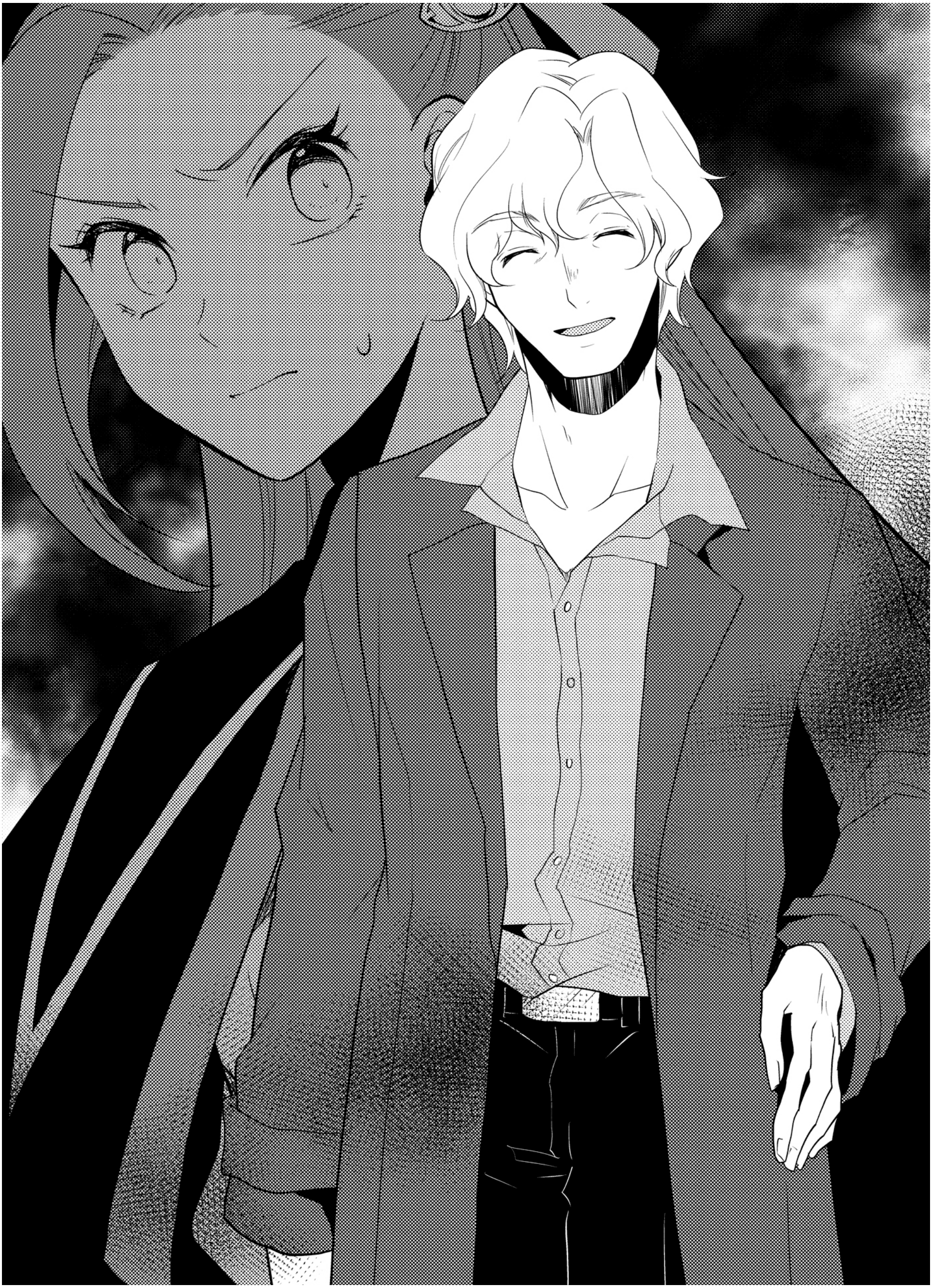
As I was thinking that, Cezar suddenly turned to look at the door, stepping in front of me protectively. Surprised, I turned and followed Cezar's gaze to find a man standing in the doorway.

"Goodness me, looks like you took them all out," said the man, his tone of voice lacking any trace of anxiety. He looked to be about the same age as my father, but... How can I put it? He was a beautiful man, who just exuded some kind of allure.

What? Who is this guy?

From Cezar's wary attitude, I was sure he wasn't one of his allies, but I also couldn't sense any hostility from the man. Besides that, I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd seen him somewhere before. As I stared steadily at the man, our gazes suddenly locked, and the man narrowed his eyes.

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Katarina Claes,” he said with a toothy grin.



Huh? So we haven't met before. When I felt like I'd seen him before, maybe it was just my imagination.

"Eh? Ah. Pleased to meet you too," I said reflexively. The man chuckled to himself.

"You're a peculiar girl," I heard him say, this time from much closer by, and when I raised my head I saw he was right in front of Cezar.

I saw Cezar's body stiffen, as he grew even more wary of the man.

The man stared right at me with gray eyes.

"Looking at your abilities and your circumstances, it really wouldn't be strange if you belonged to our side."

"What are you talking about?" Cezar asked in a suspicious tone of voice.

But I felt that I somehow understood the man's meaning. *That's right. I, Katarina Claes, originally belonged to their side—the bad guys.*

On the game screen I'd seen in my dream, it wasn't Sarah who'd commanded those men to attack Maria and Cezar, but Katarina. Despite possessing little magical ability—and not being particularly bright either—she was able to become the prince's fiancée. Later, she grew jealous of Maria for growing closer to the prince. After her torment of Maria gave way to criminal acts, she was banished from the kingdom. Then, after getting her hands on Dark Magic, she stood before Maria as an enemy once again.

That was the kind of person *Katarina Claes* was. However, when I coincidentally remembered my past life, everything around me started to change. Today, I was not only *not* exiled, I had become friends with the romanceable characters and even the protagonist herself.

But perhaps because the game still compelled me to do so, I had gained a Dark Familiar and possessed Dark Magic. And I had just used that power to hurt people. It was just as the man said. *I'm...*

"Don't let him rattle you. It's all right."

I looked up at Cezar, surprised by what he'd just said—it was almost as if he could read my mind. He looked back at me steadily, a strong resolve in his eyes.

"I don't know why you're so shaken right now, but you don't have to listen to anything that guy has to say."

“Who are you calling ‘that guy’? That’s rather rude, Your Highness,” said the man in response, shrugging as if this were supposed to be some kind of joke. It looked like he knew not only my identity, but Cezar’s as well.

“What did you come here for? Didn’t you say you weren’t going to appear in public?” Cezar asked the man.

So Cezar knows who this man is too?

“Well... As a rule, I usually don’t, but it all depends on the time and situation. This was an emergency, after all,” said the man.

Then the man started to move. Cezar braced himself, but the man leisurely walked right past us, and effortlessly lifted up Sarah in a bridal carry.

“This girl alone is not an expendable pawn, so I’ve been told to come and collect her when the situation demands it,” said the man with a grin as he held Sarah in his arms.

“This girl alone is not an expendable pawn”? So that means these other men are *all expendable?*

“Bye for now,” said the man. Still carrying Sarah, he casually stepped forward to leave.

His attitude was so casual that I almost said, “Goodbye,” myself.

“You think I’ll just let you walk away?” said Cezar, grasping his sword and glaring at the man.

Even though I was behind Cezar, I still felt a shiver go through me when I heard the former mercenary acting serious. But the man was unaffected, wearing a foolish grin on his face.

“I’ve heard rumors about your skills with a sword, Your Highness, but if you try to strike me from there, I’ll be able to unleash my magic before you reach me. I have the advantage. Though I may not look like it, my magic is quite powerful.”

No sooner had he spoken these words than a gust of wind blew through the room. It was so fierce a gale that I couldn’t keep my eyes open and closed them while protecting my face with my hands. When the air finally calmed and I opened my eyes again, the unconscious men who’d been lying on the ground had all been thrown up against the wall, and Cezar was holding Maria in his arms. It looked like he’d rushed to protect Maria from the sudden wind.

I knew I could count on him.

However, that man—who had just been in the room with us—

was nowhere to be found. The man—and Sarah—had gotten away from us.

When Cezar realized this, he tutted quietly in frustration, but soon seemed to collect his wits.

"I'll carry Maria Campbell to a safe location. After that, I'll tie these men up," he said, before immediately springing into action. I also snapped out of my stupor, and decided to help however I could.

After Cezar had carefully moved Maria and her mother to a safe location, I put a sheet I'd brought with me over them. They both had color in their cheeks now, and were breathing normally. That was a relief.

Then Cezar took some rope and started to tie the men up. I offered to help, but he refused, saying it was dangerous. He told me to call for outside help instead.

I took out the magical tool Raphael had given me. After I was done calling for help, I popped my head back into Maria's room to find that Cezar had neatly tied the men up.

Cezar read from my expression that I was worried about the men's condition.

"Their lives aren't in danger," he assured me. "They don't even seem to be badly injured."

As the one who'd put the men in that condition, I was relieved.

While we were discussing that, our backup crew finally arrived. It looked like Cezar had also called for help, as Cezar's servant, Janne, had come too. There was also a doctor among the reinforcements, who swiftly examined Maria and her mother, before turning to the men we had captured.

Luckily(?) the men had woken up by the time help arrived, so they were able to walk under their own power as they were taken away. Given how energetic they were in cursing us, it seemed like Cezar was right, and they weren't badly injured. I was, once again, relieved.

The sound of the men cursing us woke up Maria and her mother, and we shared in our delight that they were now safe. They told us that Sarah and her men had suddenly broken into their home. They had immediately knocked down Maria's mother, whereupon she hit her head and fell unconscious. When she heard the commotion, Maria came out of her room, only to be bound by

Sarah’s Dark Magic.

This all took place in the blink of an eye. We had arrived at Maria’s house only moments afterward.

Thank goodness. If we’d arrived even slightly later, what might have happened to them? Just thinking about it made me shudder.

Immediately after I took the men down, I was worried about whether or not I’d seriously injured them, but after hearing what happened to Maria and her mother, I began to think that I could have gotten away with hurting them a little.

Next, Maria thanked me profusely.

“Just when I thought everything was hopeless, I heard your voice, Lady Katarina. Then I thought it was worth holding on a little longer.” Apparently, my voice had gotten through to her.

Regarding my use of Dark Magic, I had been terrified when I lost control, and had a terrible sense of guilt. But when I realized it had allowed me to save Maria, I thought that I should at least be glad about that.

Now, as for the guards who’d been secretly sent to watch Maria, they had all been rendered unconscious, before being thrown into some bushes to hide them from view. There were traces of Dark Magic having been used on them, so it was decided that they should undergo a proper examination at a hospital.

It was decided that Maria and her mother should also have another close examination, so they were taken to hospital, while Cezar and I went to the Magical Ministry to be questioned about what had happened.

Chapter 5: The Prince's Jealousy

When we returned to the Magical Ministry, Raphael immediately came bounding up to me. He said that, since I had left him with such ominous parting words, he'd been worrying constantly. And after I sent word that I'd come face-to-face with wielders of Dark Magic, he'd gotten even more worried. He'd apparently wanted to come to the scene personally as part of the backup crew, but with the amount of work he had, this proved impossible—so he'd waited for me to return to the Ministry with bated breath, while he did his best to take care of his work.

"I can't believe you'd do something so reckless, and after I told you to be careful! You aren't hurt, are you? Does any part of your body feel strange?"

He was so worried about me that I started to feel guilty.

"I'm okay. No part of me was hurt."

After I said this, his expression finally changed to one of relief.

What followed was a round of questioning from Larna—who knew the most about my Dark Magic—and Cyrus, whose role in the meeting was to keep Larna under control. Since everyone present knew about Dark Magic, I was able to talk about the fact that I'd just used Dark Magic and—through no will of my own—totally lost control of my powers.

After hearing my account, Larna assumed a serious expression.

"So you felt a sensation like an icy blizzard blowing inside of your body—it certainly sounds like a runaway spell."

"Agreed," said Cyrus, frowning and nodding.

Though I also possessed Earth Magic, it was only a meager amount, so I'd never lost control like that before. But when my adopted brother—Keith—first came to live with my family, he'd been unable to control his own powerful magic and ended up going on a rampage. Said rampage was my fault, so following that experience I'd read about runaway magic and at least had some basic knowledge about it—so when I found myself in that condition, I thought, *Maybe that's what this is?*

Although, since I had produced such a runaway spell...

"Could it be that my Dark Magic is quite powerful?"

It was generally thought that runaway spells usually occurred in cases where the user's magical potential was very high, and they couldn't control their power. So I thought that maybe that was why I'd lost control of my magic during that encounter.

"Well... Though we still don't fully understand how to measure the power of Dark Magic, from what you've just described, I'd say that's highly probable," said Larna, holding her chin between her fingers contemplatively.

The existence of Dark Magic had been concealed by the royal family for many years—only to be exposed by someone within the family during the dispute over who should succeed the previous king. Because of this, even within the Magical Ministry, only a select few knew about it, and many questions remained unanswered.

"That said, runaway magic is not always the result of high magical potential. It can also occur as a result of emotional distress," said Cyrus.

"Ah. Right. That may have been part of it." I'd definitely heard that losing control of one's emotions could also mean losing control of one's magic.

Well, I never really understood runaway magic, seeing as I could never make anything more than a Dirt Bump, so I have some trouble remembering all the details.

"Your runaway magic may be related to the fact that you experienced such potent rage beforehand. We do know that Dark Magic can feed on negative emotions," said Larna.

Oh yeah. I do feel like I ended up in that state after getting really angry. Though everything after that is still kind of hazy...so I can't say for certain.

"Does that mean there's a chance this could happen to me again?" The thought of that really scared me. When I lost control, I felt almost like I wasn't myself anymore.

"We can't rule that out," said Cyrus, the furrows in his brow growing deeper.

"So, what should I do? I don't want to end up like that again!" I asked in desperation.

Larna and Cyrus pondered this for a while. It was Larna who eventually broke the silence.

“Suppressing your emotions can be difficult, Miss Katarina. But I’m sure you only fly into a rage when someone important to you is threatened, right?”

“I suppose so. That may be the most common reason.”

Certainly, I don’t often get mad for my own sake. But when horrible things happen to people I care about, I tend not to be able to put up with that.

“I thought so. In that case, you should consider that if you lose control of your magic, you may hurt the very people you’re trying to protect. If you keep that in mind, you may be able to control your rage and calm yourself down.”

I see! If I just think to myself that—when I get angry—I risk hurting the people I care about, I may be able to control it.

“That might work! Next time it looks like something like what happened today might happen again, I’ll try that!” I said in delight.

“Really? Great!” said Larna, sharing my joy.

But then Cyrus felt the need to rain on my parade.

“Hey now, we don’t know for sure if that will even be possible. We need to come up with additional measures to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

He was absolutely right. So I reined in my delight for the time being, and put on what I thought was an expression of commendable sobriety.

“Yes sir,” I said, and nodded.

As for the measures we would put in place, Cyrus came up with few suggestions: “Make an effort not to get emotional,” “Be especially careful not to store up negative emotions,” “When you absolutely have to use Dark Magic, take due caution,” and “Don’t do anything so risky again, like getting involved with that dangerous organization.” He not only admonished me to be more careful from now on, but for some reason addressed the same warning to Larna.

We also agreed that if we came up with any more countermeasures, we wouldn’t hesitate to notify each other. At that point, I thought we were done talking. However...

“So, after you entered that state, how did you manage to return to your senses? Could you tell me more about that?” asked Larna, brimming with curiosity.

That’s right—I hadn’t explained the process of how I’d come back from my rampage in any detail. I couldn't help but think that the truth would be a bit embarrassing for a young noblewoman to share. But with Larna's eyes shining so intently, and Cyrus urging me to explain with such a serious expression, I couldn't stop myself from giving a full confession.

"Well, Prince Cezar saw that something was wrong with me and startled me to snap me out of it. That's how I came to my senses," I said, remaining vague about the fine details.

"So, he thought that by startling someone who had taken leave of their senses, he could interrupt their mental processes for a split second, giving them a chance to regain control... The Prince of Ethenell sounds like a quick thinker," said Cyrus, sounding impressed.

But Larna wasn't deterred.

"I see... So what exactly did he do to startle you? Shout in your ear, perhaps?" she asked insistently.

Ah... Guess I'm going to have to tell her.

"Um... My nose..."

"Your nose?"

"He...bit it."

For a painfully long moment, the room was silent, as if time had stopped.

"So, you're telling us that, in order to startle you, the Prince of Ethenell *bit you on the nose*?" Cyrus eventually asked, seeking confirmation of the outlandish thing he'd just heard. His face was serious.

"Yes. That's right," I answered.

Another spell of awkward silence ensued, until...

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha!" Larna's raucous laughter resounded throughout the room. "Ah ha ha ha ha ha, he bit your nose in order to startle you? Who does that? Wasn't there any other way? Ah ha ha ha!"

As Larna doubled over from laughter, I finally paused to wonder why exactly I'd been bitten on the nose. At the time, I'd been so startled by Cezar's act, and so glad to have been saved thanks to him, that I hadn't asked myself, *Why did it have to be my nose?*

"Well, perhaps that's the traditional way of surprising someone in Ethenell?" said Cyrus, seriously considering this possibility even as Larna struggled to stop laughing.

A chaotic atmosphere had descended over the room. I was just glad that at least no one said it was indecent for a young noblewoman to have her nose bitten.

Eventually, Larna finished laughing.

“Well then, I’ll have to note this in my records too,” she said coolly.

“Eh?!” I yelped in surprise. “You’re going to *record* what I just said? Including the part about me getting my nose bitten?!”

“Yeah, that seems to have been particularly important. We may need this information in the future, if you ever end up in the same condition again.”

“N-No way! Are you telling me that every time that happens, I’ll get bitten on the nose again?!”

“Oh, I hardly think we’ll have to go that far. After all, we came up with some other potential solutions.”

“Ah, that’s right... But aren’t a lot of people going to read those records...?” *When that happens, I’m going to get all kinds of comments. So will Cezar. It would be one thing for me to suffer that, but I’d feel so guilty if Cezar had to suffer for saving me.*

“Oh, when it comes to anything that might impact your future—or that of the Prince of Ethenell—we’ll really only show it to the few people who need to see it, so you can put your mind at ease,” said Larna.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

After that, they pressed me on some other points, including how I’d sensed Maria was in peril. But since I’d had similar hunches in the past (like the time Raphael caused an incident), we all agreed that I must just be a girl with keen intuition. Though the look in Larna’s eyes indicated that she still *really* wanted to investigate further.

Then I explained what had happened with Sarah and the mysterious man who appeared at Maria’s house. By the time they finished questioning me, the sun had already gone down.

After Maria and her mother had received a proper examination from the doctors at the hospital, Maria and her parents (her father was also coming, now that the Ministry had contacted him) would spend the night in one of the Ministry’s facilities.

Her unofficial bodyguards also turned out to be okay.

I was told that they hadn’t finished questioning Cezar yet, but I was feeling indescribably exhausted, so I decided to leave the

Ministry rather than wait around to talk to him. I could always thank him tomorrow.

After climbing aboard my carriage bound for Claes Manor, I took a big breath and slowly exhaled.

It turned out that the men captured at Maria's house were all just hired goons, who knew almost nothing about the organization Sarah worked for.

"This girl alone is not an expendable pawn, so I've been told to come and collect her when the situation demands it."

Just as the mysterious man had said, everyone besides Sarah had just been disposable minions. The same was probably true of Katarina in the game. That would explain why she got herself caught during that scene. Her thirst for revenge was exploited to get her to obtain Dark Magic. Then, when she failed in her revenge, she was promptly discarded.

When I considered that, I actually felt a little sorry for the game's Katarina, even though I'd only ever thought of her as a bad person. However, when I remembered that the threat of that particular Bad End—getting arrested during Cezar's route—had just vanished, I also felt a sense of relief.

The game's story wasn't over yet, and there was still a hidden character whose identity I didn't know. I also didn't know what might happen with the other romanceable characters. Even so, with the feeling that I'd overcome another obstacle, I let myself relax as I looked out the window, gazing at the scenery illuminated by the setting sun, and exhaled heavily once more. As soon as I got back to the manor and went to bed I was out like a light.

The next thing I knew, it was morning. And first thing in the morning, Keith came barging into my room to ask me all kinds of questions, before giving me a stern lecture. Though on this occasion, since I was well aware of having stuck my nose into some dangerous business, I apologized sincerely.

Well, that was how I welcomed the morning, but as luck would have it, today was my day off. Since I hadn't had the opportunity to properly thank Cezar yesterday, I thought I would go to see him to make up for that.

"Lady Katarina, you have a visitor," one of my servants told me.

Oh? It isn't often that my servants come to inform me of visitors.

Normally, my childhood friends came to hang around Claes Manor as if it were their second home. The servants didn't usually go to the trouble of telling me when they arrived. *Who on earth could it be?* I wondered in bemusement, as I quickly got dressed and headed to the room where my visitor was said to be waiting for me. There I found the very person I had announced I was going to see today.

"Cezar, what brings you here?" I asked, so surprised that I forgot to give a proper greeting.

When Cezar saw my expression, his eyes narrowed.

"Yesterday, we didn't have another chance to talk after being separated at the Ministry, but I couldn't help but wonder if you were feeling all right. Are you?"

Yesterday, my loss of control over my Dark Magic—as well as the things that mystery man had said—had left me quite shaken.

So Cezar was concerned about me and came to check up on me. He's so kind.

"Yes. I feel much better after a good night's sleep." Feeling all better after a hearty meal and a good night's sleep was one of my special skills.

"Really? Glad to hear it," said Cezar with a relieved expression, before asking, "How did your questioning go?"

"Let me see... Well, a couple of superiors I know very well asked me a lot of detailed questions," I answered. Then I remembered admitting that—in the midst of our emergency—Cezar had bitten me on the nose. This was not only a blemish on my honor, but on Cezar's as well, so I felt like I should tell him what I'd said. "Erm, well, during the meeting, I ended up having to explain what you did to startle me in order to bring me to my senses. Sorry about that," I apologized.

"No, I was pretty sure they'd ask about that. I'm sorry for doing such a thing—though it was on the spur of the moment, during an emergency," said Cezar, before bowing his head.

"Oh, but if you hadn't saved me then, I don't know what might have happened. I actually needed to thank you, so you shouldn't apologize," I insisted, waving my hand dismissively.

Cezar finally raised his head.

"It's such a relief to hear you say that," he said with a smile.

"Although, I was shocked when you brought your face so close to mine. I wasn't sure what you would do," I said, remembering the fateful moment.

Cezar grinned like a mischievous child.

"Could it be that you thought I was going to kiss you?"

"Eh? K-Kiss me?!"

Does he mean a kiss on the lips?! Eh? No way was I expecting that!

When Cezar saw how flustered I looked, he chuckled.

"You know, like this," he said, before bringing his face close to mine. I froze. Now that his face was close to mine, I was shocked by just how elegant and sexy it was. His face had changed from mere moments ago when he was teasing me. Now his expression was serious. "Katarina, I—" he began.

But right after he opened his mouth, the door swung open with a bang. The person who'd thrown the door open stormed into the room, grabbed me by the shoulders, and pulled me toward themselves.

"Prince Cezar," they said in a severe tone of voice, "can I ask you not to approach my fiancée so casually?"

This was harsh enough that, if someone had said it to me, I would have apologized immediately, but Cezar responded with an elegant greeting.

"Prince Jeord, what a surprise. I must thank you for your hospitality."

"You are welcome," Jeord said, his brow furrowed.

This sounded just barely like a greeting. However, when I considered that he was speaking to another royal, I realized that this might lead to some trouble. Normally, Jeord would never conduct himself this way.

"More importantly, Prince Cezar, what brings you to my fiancée's home?"

"Ah, yesterday, Lady Katarina and I found ourselves caught up in an incident together, so I was worried how she was getting on, and came to pay her a visit."

"Thank you so much for going to all that trouble. However, Katarina is my fiancée, so you may feel free to let me worry about her instead."

Although Jeord's hostility was on full display—which was rare for him—Cezar dealt with him without ever disrupting his own easygoing attitude.

"I see. But since we *fought together* yesterday, I could not help but worry. Moreover, I had something for which I wished to apologize." Cezar then paused and turned to look at me, smiling as if to say, “Right?”

Eh? He wanted to apologize for something. Don’t tell me this is about him biting my nose?! If so, I want him to know I’m fine now.

“Erm, regarding that, I really am fine now. Please, Cezar, you forget about it too,” I said, waving my hand again.

It was not Cezar who responded, but Jeord. Still grasping my shoulders, he twitched as he spoke.

“Did you call him...*Cezar*?”

It was my turn to jump at his severe tone of voice. *Oh, shoot. I was so flustered that I addressed him without his title, like I do when it’s just the two of us.* Worried that Jeord was about to get angry with me for my impertinence, I was about to make some excuse.

But before I could open my mouth, Cezar answered for me.

“Don’t worry, I asked her to call me that. Lady Katarina and I have become quite friendly.”

After he said this, I felt Jeord’s grip on my shoulders tighten. Wondering why, I looked up at Jeord’s face to see his brows knitted, his expression even more severe than before. Normally, he always wore a princely smile, and made an effort not to let his true feelings show. It was simply out of the question for Jeord to reveal such agitation to any stranger, let alone a foreign royal.

I started to worry, and was about to say something, but this time it was Jeord who spoke before I could.

“When you talk of how friendly you are with Katarina, could you be referring to that thing you did with the aim of startling her?” said Jeord with a voice so icy that it chilled me to my core. I stood there with my mouth hanging open.

“Ah! Prince Jeord, have you heard about what happened yesterday?” I said, referring to my nose getting bitten.

“I heard a rough account of it from my brother.”

Ooh, I guess since I told Larna, she must have told Jeffrey. There was something slightly embarrassing about him knowing that I’d had my nose bitten.

“That was the very act for which I was about to make a proper apology to Katarina. It was a spur of the moment thing, but I couldn’t think of anything else. It was terribly rude of me. I would also like to extend my sincere apologies to you, Prince Jeord, her fiancé,” said Cezar, making a respectful apology to both of us.

“Erm, but it was only because you did that, Cezar, that I was able to come back to my senses, so you saved me...” I said, hoping to communicate that Cezar wasn't at fault. Then I saw the furrows in Jeord's brow become even deeper.

"I do know that. I understand that Prince Cezar's actions saved you, Katarina. But I can't just stand by when anyone besides me touches you. Katarina, you are *my* fiancée."

After saying this, for some reason Jeord brought his face closer to mine. I didn't understand why, and just stood rooted to the spot, my eyes wide open. As Jeord's face came much too close to mine, my head started to get fuzzy. At the same time, I felt something soft brush against my lips.

Eh? This sensation seems familiar. Are those Jeord's lips?! But that would mean... H-He kissed me? Wh-Why would he do that, all of a sudden?! I was confused, in full-on panic mode inside my head, but my body wouldn't move. I just had to take it. *This is a looong kiss. When he's kissed me in the past, he's always pulled away immediately, but this time his lips don't seem to be going anywhere. Not only that, but something soft just went inside my mouth! What on earth is happening? Hm? Could it be? I've only heard about it in rumors, but is this— Is this what they call a grown-up kiss?!*

My head was too full for me to think anymore, so I let go of my consciousness.

"Katarina is my precious fiancée. So please, don't have anything more to do with her," I thought I heard Jeord's severe voice say, just as my thoughts were fading away.

After giving me a piggyback ride back home from the mountains where I injured myself, my older brother's legs were even more badly hurt than we imagined. The next morning, he was taken to hospital.

As I watched him leave, I apologized.

"I'm sorry; this is my fault."

"It's not your fault," my brother replied woodenly, looking back with an extremely disapproving expression on his face. "It's a big brother's job to help his little sister when she's in trouble," he said quietly, before quickly stepping out of the door.

Suddenly I felt a warmth in my chest, and I was really happy.

"Thanks, —."

Though he bullied me a lot, and said things that upset me, I guess I still loved my big brother.

Ah, I had another nostalgic dream. It feels like I've been having this kind of dream a lot recently. Maybe it's because I've been confusing Cezar with my big brother from my past life. Nah, my big brother wasn't that cool. It was only after these thoughts occurred to me that I wondered, *Huh? Come to think of it, why am I in bed again?*

When I looked up, I saw the same ceiling I saw every day, in my bedroom. Bright rays of sunlight still streamed in through the windows.

It's morning? Wait, if it were morning then Anne would have come to wake me up. When did I even go to bed? Thinking that this was all very strange, I sat up.

"Looks like you're awake, Katarina. Thank goodness," said Jeord, coming toward me at an alarming pace.

Huh? What is Jeord doing in my room? I wondered, giving him a quizzical look. He suddenly bowed his head.

"I'm sorry, Katarina. The truth is, I was convinced that Prince Cezar had kissed you..."

"Eh?! Prince Cezar has never done anything of the sort!"

"So it would seem. Later, I was told that was not the case. It would appear that there was a misunderstanding between my brother and me. Sorry."

I can't believe he thought that Cezar and I kissed. How embarrassing.

"And so I became so jealous that I forgot myself—and did something like *that* despite having company."

Hm? Something like what*...? Oh yeah?! Jeord gave me a g-grown-up kiss!* I felt the heat rising in my face again, gasping loudly while feeling so embarrassed that I wanted to run around the room.

"Well, can I ask you to forgive me?" Jeord asked. As he looked up at me with his face still downcast, his eyes reminded me of a poor abandoned puppy.

"Ah, uh, sure," I responded, nodding while my face was still burning red.

A smile suddenly broke across Jeord's face, almost like a flower blooming.

I couldn't help but be spellbound by that smile.

Then the door to my room was thrown open with a loud bang.

"I heard what happened, Prince Jeord. Please, step away from Lady Katarina," said Mary, charging toward us with such momentum that I expected to hear a *zoom* sound effect.

"Prince Alan," said Mary, whereupon Alan—who'd come in after her—tore Jeord away from my bed.

"Hang on, what are you doing?" said Jeord disapprovingly.

Next, Keith entered the room with his arms folded.

"You're in no position to be asking that," he declared. "Please, reflect on your actions this time. You are forbidden to enter Claes Manor for the time being."

"That's right. You mustn't go near Lady Katarina for the time being, Prince Jeord," said Sophia, who had arrived while Keith was still speaking. Nicol, standing behind her, nodded silently.

With their combined strength, my friends steadily pushed Jeord out of my room.

"I have already apologized to Katarina, and she has forgiven me," said Jeord.

"Even if Lady Katarina forgives you, we shan't," said Mary, showing no signs of backing down. Jeord steadily drifted further away.

As I watched this unfold, I felt the burning sensation recede from my face.

"You okay, big sis?" asked Keith, having suddenly appeared at my bedside again.

Though it was not at all uncommon for my friends to visit me on my days off, it was extremely rare for all of them to visit at once.

"Ah, well it sounds like everyone heard what happened to you yesterday, so they were worried and came to see how you were," said Keith with a wry chuckle.

"Really?"

When I saw how excited my friends all looked, I felt comforted for some reason.

Next time I feel like I'm about to lose control of my Dark Magic, I'll remember the people I care about. It's not very likely, but if it looks like it might happen again, I'll think of all of them. If I only do that, I'm sure I'll be fine. I just had that feeling.

A while later, Maria brought me a bunch of sweets as thanks for my help yesterday. Together with Maria, who was feeling much better, my friends and I all shared her sweets. It was such a nice day off that the events of the previous day seemed almost like a dream.

Afterword

Hello, everyone. It’s been a while. My name is Satoru Yamaguchi. *My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom!* has just reached its thirteenth volume. I feel truly grateful for everyone who has read this far. Thank you very much.

By the way, as I’m writing this afterword, it’s still summer, so it’s extremely hot, but since this book will be released near the end of September, I can hope that it will be a little cooler by then.

This volume focused on Cezar, one of the hidden characters. He comes to Sorcié to study, triggering an event?! Maria and Cezar finally meet, but in the end, will love bloom between them?! That’s more or less the story of volume 13. I would be delighted if those who are curious are kind enough to read it.

Now then, though some might already be aware of this, a movie is scheduled for release this December. I, the writer of the source material, took the liberty of writing the script for this adaptation. I did the very best that I could, so I hope you will go and see it. I’m certainly looking forward to seeing Katarina and company on the big screen.

Typically the afterword would end here, but this time I’ve decided to make it a little longer and talk a bit about my summer. I feel as if, each and every year, summer temperatures are climbing steadily higher, but summer this year was filled with some incredibly hot days. Whenever I step out of my air-conditioned room, the difference in temperature between the inside and the outside leaves me dizzy. I’ve even said to some people, “Give it ten more years and we won’t even be able to go outside without protection.”

Also, Niigata Prefecture, where I live, is one of the snowiest regions in the country. When summer gets this hot in spite of that, I really feel downhearted. For some reason, there are still a number of days when we get stuck with the highest temperatures in the country. I always feel like muttering, “Have snow, or get hot. Pick one.” Plus, it’s also very humid, so summer feels really muggy. When the temperature gets to 40 degrees, I feel like I’ve stepped into a mist sauna.

Also, elementary school children start their summer holiday at the end of July, so kids have started doing radio calisthenics in the square next to my house. The voice on the radio is cheery, but these days it’s really hot even in the morning. So those kids have to be struggling. Back in the day, the kids always seemed to have a lot of fun playing, but with this heat the risk of heat stroke is high, so I hardly see kids playing at all during the day. Perhaps they’re all enjoying playing games or watching videos indoors. I guess parents can no longer tell their kids to stop playing games and go play outside, the way they used to. It’s so hot outside these days that it’s dangerous.

So far I’ve only written my complaints about summer, so now I’ll write something positive. This year, the vegetable patch at my house was really productive; I had an incredible harvest of cucumbers, eggplants, and tomatoes. And now I’m getting a lot of watermelons. I hope you can all make it through the heat with summer vegetables too!

Finally, I’d like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Hidaka Nami-san—for always providing such wonderful illustrations—my chief editor, and everyone else who lent their efforts to the publication of this book. Everybody, thank you so much.

Satoru Yamaguchi

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My Next Life as a Villainess: All Routes Lead to Doom! Volume 13
by Satoru Yamaguchi

Translated by Joshua Douglass-Molloy
Edited by Jonathan Engel

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